

WORLD WATCH LIST 2023

SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.
8

Iran



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).

Key findings

Converts from Islam to Christianity bear the brunt of religious freedom violations, carried out by the government in particular and to a lesser extent by society and the converts' families. The government sees Iranian Christians as an attempt by Western countries to undermine Islam and the Islamic regime of Iran. Leaders of Christian convert groups, as well as common members and Christians of other denominational backgrounds supporting them, have been arrested, prosecuted and have received long prison sentences for "crimes against national security". The historical communities of Armenian and Assyrian Christians are recognized and protected by the State, but are treated as second-class citizens. They suffer from legalized discrimination, including being denied the use of Persian for any religious activity or Christian material. Being Muslim is a requirement for most jobs, especially in the government. In addition, historical Christian communities are not allowed to contact Muslim-background Christians (speaking Persian) or have them attend church services.

Quick facts

LEADER

Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei

POPULATION

86,023,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

1,245,000

MAIN RELIGION

Islam

GOVERNMENT

Theocratic Republic

Context

| Main Religions | Number of adherents | Percentage |
|----------------|---------------------|------------|
| Christians | 1,245,000 | 1.4 |
| Muslims | 84,136,707 | 97.8 |
| Baha'is | 251,157 | 0.3 |
| Agnostics | 241,230 | 0.3 |

Source¹

Iran became an Islamic Republic when the Shah was removed in the 1979 Revolution and Shia Islamic clerics took control, banning Western influence (which they see as Christian) from their country. Today, the most senior and influential cleric is the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. The withdrawal of the USA from the Iran Deal (officially called the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, JCPOA) in 2018 led to the reinstatement of sanctions. This resulted in the Iranian currency (rial) to fall in value and a significant deterioration of the Iranian economy. Increasing tensions led to Iran breaching the terms of its agreement and a shadow war which saw Iran's most influential military commander, Major General Qasem Soleimani, being assassinated by the USA in January 2020, among other incidents. The current USA government is willing to return to the JCPOA, but as of September 2022 Iran's position is still unclear. This is partly due to domestic politics, in which there is a division between the Islamic left (Reformists) and the Islamic right (Principlists), with the Pragmatists in the middle. However, it is Supreme Leader Khamenei,

a Principlist, who pulls all political strings. He appoints the Guardian Council, which has veto power on all parliamentary legislation and also vets all candidates for political positions, including the parliament. For years, thousands of Reformists candidates have been rejected by the Guardian Council, resulting in opposition boycotts of the latest elections. Hence, after repressing all opposition, the Principlists managed to win both the parliamentary elections in February 2020 and the presidential elections in June 2021. Newly elected hardline president Ebrahim Raisi was previously the head of the Iranian judiciary and is known for his role in the execution of thousands of Iranian dissidents. With the Principlists now dominating all state institutions, it has become less likely that Iran will return to the JCPOA.

Protests have been brutally repressed and dozens of human rights defenders and activists given long prison sentences. The government monitors internet, censors content or slows connection speed to contain discontent and protests. Those found opposing the regime are likely to be arrested and imprisoned. Iran is one of the world's most repressive countries for journalists; journalists are harassed, arbitrarily arrested, tried unfairly and given long jail sentences.

Iran is one of just six UN states not to have ratified the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Women are, in general, more economically vulnerable, due to low education rates, poverty and early marriage. Under Sharia, daughters typically receive half the inheritance that sons receive.

Iran has alliances with groups like Hezbollah and Hamas. The threat of attack by violent Islamic militants in Iran is high, since Iran has fought against the Sunni Islamic State group and oppresses Sunnis on its soil.

Officially, most Iranians follow the official state religion: Shia Islam, with a significant minority (10%) following Sunni Islam. However, recent research found that only around 32% of the Iranians still call themselves Shia adherents. Iran's Constitution recognizes four religious groups: Muslims, Zoroastrians, Jews, and Christians. Iranians must declare to be one of these in order to claim legal rights, including entrance to university. Everyone who is not Shia Muslim experiences discrimination and limitations, and even some Shia Sufi groups are put under pressure by the government. Unrecognized minorities (converts to Christianity, Bahá'í, Dervish and non-believers) experience serious violations.

¹ Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2022) (Adapted according to OD-estimate)

How the situation varies by region

Government control is highest in urban areas, while rural areas are less monitored. However, the anonymity of urban areas gives Christians more freedom to organize meetings and activities than in rural areas, in which social control is higher.

Who is affected?

Communities of expatriate Christians

This group consists of Christian expatriates from the Far East (e.g., Philippines, South Korea) and the West, many of whom have a Catholic, Lutheran, or Presbyterian background. Of the small number of churches, some expatriate churches have been forced to shut down after local converts with an Islamic background started attending. Joint annual prayer meetings between church leaders of different denominations were also cancelled in the past due to pressure from Iran's security apparatus.

It is absolutely forbidden for expatriate Christians to interact with Iranian converts from Islam to Christianity, let alone welcome them into their church communities.

Historical Christian communities

Historical ethnic Christian minorities such as the Armenian and Assyrian Christians are relatively free to practice their belief. They are allowed to preach to fellow countrymen in their own language, but it is forbidden to minister to people with a Muslim background (speaking Persian) or have them attend church services. Although formally recognized and

protected by law, they are treated as second-class citizens and face legal and societal discrimination. Besides this, they will face imprisonment if they do reach out to Muslims.

Converts to Christianity

Converts from Islam to Christianity constitute the largest category in the country. They bear the brunt of persecution carried out by the government, and to a lesser extent by their (extended) families and society. Baptism is seen as a public declaration of one's denunciation of Islam and is therefore forbidden. Also, children born to converts from Islam to Christianity are automatically registered as Muslims, since their parents cannot change their religious affiliation. Previously, the leaders of Christian convert groups were arrested, prosecuted and received long prison terms for crimes against national security. However, an increasing number of non-leaders have received similar charges too, as well as Christians of other denominations supporting them. There is also a growing community of Iranian Christian converts worldwide, as over the years many converts have fled the country and other Iranians have become Christians abroad.

Non-traditional Christian communities

Although it is difficult to make a sharp distinction between this category and the communities of converts, there are Christians belonging to Evangelical, Baptist, and Pentecostal communities. They often have an Armenian, Assyrian, Jewish, or a Zoroastrian background. Others include the children and grandchildren of converts from Islam. They face the same severe persecution from the government and are discriminated against by society, especially if they engage in any evangelistic or house-church activities.



Main sources of persecution and discrimination

Islamic oppression:

All laws must be consistent with Sharia law. A Guardian Council, appointed by Supreme Leader ayatollah Khamenei and consisting of Shia scholars and clerics, reviews all legislation as well as candidates for the highest public appointments e.g., the presidency and parliament. Ethnic Persians are considered Muslim, so converts to Christianity are seen as apostates. This makes almost all Christian activity illegal, especially in the Persian language. Local Muslim clerics sometimes incite violence against religious minority groups. Iranian society is less fanatical than its leadership due to the widespread influence of moderate Sufi Islam as well as the pride of the Iranian people in pre-Islamic Persian culture. Nevertheless, religious families, including those of other ethnic minority groups, often put pressure on family members converting from Islam to Christianity.

Dictatorial paranoia:

The regime aims to protect the values of the 1979 Revolution, from which it derives its legitimacy. Christianity is viewed as a dangerous Western influence and threat to the Islamic identity of Iran. This explains why especially converts from Islam are convicted of crimes against national security. In addition, the violent repression of all opposition shows that the regime above all cares about keeping its power base.

Organized corruption and crime:

Imprisoned Christians, especially converts, are regularly offered release on bail. This often involves large amounts of money – reportedly varying between 2,000 and 150,000 USD – forcing Christians or their families to hand over title deeds to homes and sometimes businesses. Persons released on bail often silence themselves due to fear of losing their family's property. The Iranian regime puts pressure on them to leave the country and forfeit their bail. It is assumed that government officials use the bail system to get rich and financially ruin Christians.

Clan oppression:

Iran has an honor and shame culture, especially present in rural areas. In addition, the population is multi-cultural, with some ethnic groups having strong group identities. Conversion to Christianity is often seen as betrayal of the group and bringing shame to the family. This can lead to additional pressure on converts to Christianity.

Christian denominational protectionism:

The Iranian authorities like to highlight the presence of representatives of the Armenian and Assyrian churches in the media and in international settings to portray a positive impression of the country's religious tolerance. These church representatives make public statements about "the freedom all Christians enjoy", while in fact just a small section of the Christian community enjoys a very limited level of freedom. These statements are often used to delegitimize other Christian denominations (mostly Protestant converts from a Muslim background) who do not conform to the government's restrictions and who want to exercise their religious freedom to a greater degree.



How are men and women differently affected?

WOMEN

With many churches forced to shut down and Christians increasingly isolated, some Christian women, particularly Muslim background converts, are forced to marry Muslims. Pressured by family and local community; single Christian women seeking employment will be viewed unfavorably in the marketplace. If already married, her children can be taken away to ensure they are raised as Muslims. Within marriages, Christian women are unprotected against sexual abuse and domestic violence; this lack of legal protection creates impunity for perpetrators of violent religious persecution of Christian women in private and public spheres.

- Denied access to social community / networks
- Denied custody of children
- Economic harassment via work / job / business
- Enforced religious dress code
- Forced divorce
- Forced marriage
- Imprisonment by the government
- Incarceration by family / house arrest
- Travel bans / restrictions on movement
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological
- Violence – sexual

MEN

Men, particularly pastors, are more likely to be arrested, prosecuted, and imprisoned for lengthy periods. They are usually the primary providers for their families. When converting to Christianity, men risk losing their jobs. If they apply for a business registration or permit and the officer discovers their faith, the application is likely to be refused. This puts extra financial and psychological pressure on their families. Men also

face monitoring, threats and harassment. In contrast to women, male converts are not seen as “misguided”, but as wilfully making wrong choices.

- Economic harassment via work / job / business
- Forced to flee town / country
- Imprisonment by the government
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological

WWL 5 year trend

| WWL Year | Position on Open Doors World Watch List | Persecution rounded score out of 100 |
|----------|---|--------------------------------------|
| 2023 | 8 | 86 |
| 2022 | 9 | 85 |
| 2021 | 8 | 86 |
| 2020 | 9 | 85 |
| 2019 | 9 | 85 |

Average pressure remains at an extremely high level in Iran. The one-point increase in score was mainly caused by an increase in reported violent incidents, including an abduction. The outlook for Iranian Christians, in particular converts from Islam to Christianity, is by no means improving. The country’s political institutions, including the presidency, are all dominated by hardliners. The amendment and tightening of the penal code in 2021, which is also used to prosecute Christians, is all part of a wider development towards Iran becoming a totalitarian state. State surveillance is on the rise and the authorities are increasingly exerting a firmer grip on daily life and activities, an attitude reflected in the harsh responses to the protests that followed the death of Mahsa Amini on 16 September 2022. The scores in all spheres of life are at an extreme level.



Examples of violence in the reporting period

- Exorbitant sums for bail demanded:** The Iranian regime continued its practice of requiring exorbitant sums for releasing detained Christians on bail. In recent years, several Christians had to pay high amounts for bail (see for example: [Article 18, 4 October 2021](#), [Article Eighteen, 10 May 2022](#), [Article Eighteen, 7 June 2022](#), [Article Eighteen, 29 June 2022](#), [Article Eighteen, 11 July 2022](#)). It is believed that the Iranian regime requires such high sums of money for bail in order to financially bankrupt Christians and to enrich high officials ([The Guardian, 28 November 2016](#), [Iran Focus, 15 June 2020](#)). Instead of imprisoning them, the Iranian regime severely threatens Christians after their release, forcing them to flee the country, thus forfeiting their bail. Many Iranian Christians have had to sell their (business) properties or hand over their title deeds to be able to pay; those who do not have the financial means often remain imprisoned.
- House churches being raided:** The regime continued its practice of raiding house churches. Many of the Christians caught during such raids are forced to sign declarations to refrain from further contact with other Christians, which forces them into isolation. Others are being prosecuted and sentenced. Many Iranian Christians decide to flee the country after they have appeared on the government’s radar.
- Recognized Christians do not have religious freedom:** Although officially recognized in the country’s constitution, even the historical Armenian and Assyrian Christians do not have religious freedom, as claimed by the regime. Also, this year, at least two Armenian Christians received prison sentences for their Christian activities ([Article Eighteen, 8 September 2022](#)).

| WWL Year | Christians detained | Christians physically or mentally abused | Christians internally displaced | Christians forced to flee their countries |
|----------|---------------------|--|---------------------------------|---|
| 2023 | 48 | 212 | 100* | 1000* |
| 2022 | 49 | 114 | 90 | 1000* |

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

It is risky for Christians, especially converts, to express their faith publicly (e.g., in blogs or on social media) since the internet is monitored and this can be used as evidence prior to an arrest. Sharing Christian messages (especially in Persian) can be interpreted as an act of proselytization. Accessing online Christian materials and contacting foreign Christians are risky activities, and possessing Christian materials in Persian – especially in significant quantities – suggests they are for distribution to Muslim background Iranians. Meetings involving converts from an Islamic background are monitored and frequently raided.

Family life

Christians cannot adopt Muslim children, but Armenians and Assyrians have their own orphanages from where they can adopt. The children of converts are automatically registered as Muslim and must attend Islamic-based education, which has been further

Islamized since the 1979 Revolution. Even the children of Armenian and Assyrian Christians are forced to take Islamic classes at elementary school. Opposition to this has led to court cases against parents and threats against the children involved. At university level, courses like Islamic history, Quranic teachings and Arabic are mandatory. University application forms require the applicants to indicate their religion. If a Muslim-born individual lists Christianity, he or she will not be accepted. Church leaders, and increasingly church members, are often imprisoned for long periods, which has a traumatic effect on the whole family. According to Article 881 of the Civil Code, a non-Muslim cannot inherit property from a Muslim. Even if only one of the heirs of a non-Muslim is Muslim, that person will receive the entire inheritance.

Community life

Christians are monitored, especially if they are suspected of running a house church or

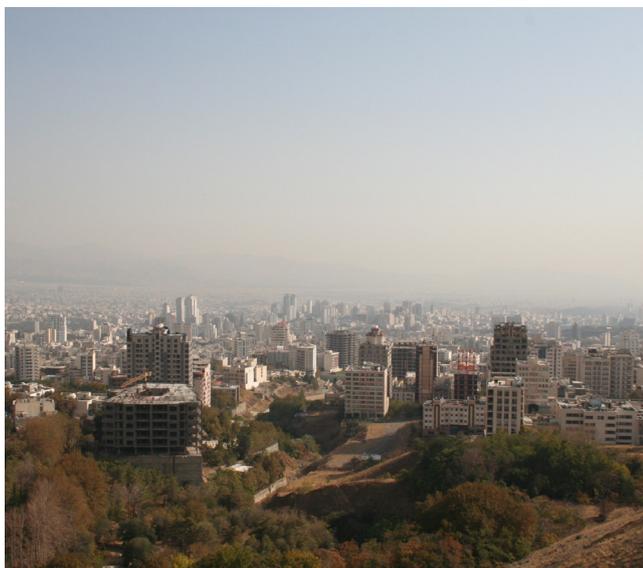
engaging in evangelism. These Christians will be frequently summoned for interrogation designed to intimidate. Informers in Western countries report back to Iranian intelligence on activities of Iranian Christians abroad. All women in Iran have to cover their heads and wear the hijab. The State controls more than 80% of the economy, and doing business in Iran is dependent on clientelism and cronyism. Historical Christians like the Armenians and Assyrians will face discrimination when doing business, while other types of Christians can rarely conduct business in Iran.

National life

High positions in the government are reserved for Shia Muslims; Christians are banned from public office, except for three parliamentary seats reserved for Armenian/Assyrian Christians. Criticizing the government can be dangerous. The national media is tightly controlled, and both state officials and imams have criticized Christians (typically referring to Zionism and house churches). Sexual harassment is common, despite it being a violation of the Iranian penal code. Family members can harm converts with impunity.

Church life

Most church services are monitored by the police, which leads to fear for attendees. Armenian and Assyrian Christians may conduct services in their own languages as long as they do not welcome Muslim background Christians. Armenians and Assyrians also run some state-subsidized schools; however, the headteachers are generally Muslim. Over the past few years, the government has intensified efforts to remove Persian-speaking Christians from Iran by shutting down churches and arresting leaders. Officially, there are hardly any Persian-speaking churches left in the country.



International obligations & rights violated

Iran 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 on the Rights of the Child (CRC)

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

- Christians are arbitrarily arrested, charged for national security crimes, and sentenced without a fair trial (ICCPR Art. 9)
- Peaceful Christian religious activities are monitored and are regularly disrupted by the state on national security grounds (ICCPR Arts. 18 and 21)
- Converts to Christianity are persecuted by the state because of their decision to leave Islam (ICCPR Art. 18)
- Christians from all denominations are monitored by the state, in violation of their right to privacy (ICCPR Art. 17)
- Christian children are forced to receive Islamic religious education (ICCPR Art. 18 and CRC Art. 14)
- Christians cannot inherit from Muslims and have restricted access to higher education and public employment (ICCPR Art. 26)

Situation of other religious minorities

Baha'i, Sunni, Sufi (Dervish) Muslims, and other religious minorities (like the Yarsanis) are also persecuted in Iran. Many dissidents from these groups have been executed – mainly on charges of terrorism (instead of “apostasy”). Ethnic minorities such as the Kurds, Baloch and Iranian Arabs face government suspicion and discrimination as well.



Open Doors in Iran

Open Doors is supporting the church in Iran through partners with Christian multimedia initiatives and advocacy.

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: © 2023 Open Doors International.
- The WWL 2023 reporting period was 01 October 2021 - 30 September 2022.
- 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 2023 ranking and reports - can be found [here](#) (password: freedom).

Many photos in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.
