

# WORLD WATCH LIST 2023

SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.  
**49**

## Jordan



### 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

Most Christians belong to Orthodox or Roman Catholic churches. Overall, they enjoy a relatively high level of religious freedom but experience discrimination in employment, monitoring of activities and restrictions against public preaching. An open testimony of faith by a Christian with a Muslim background can lead to beatings, arrest and killing.

Unrecognized churches can face harassment by public authorities, particularly those that actively evangelize. Although Jordan likes to present itself as a beacon of tolerance and interfaith dialogue, radicalized Sunnis and returning jihadists from Syria and Iraq continue to pose a threat to the Christian community. Jordan has a disproportionately high number of Salafi Muslims, who are potentially a danger to Christians and other non-conforming groups living in the country.

## Quick facts

### LEADER

King Abdullah II

### POPULATION

10,301,000

### NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

170,000 (OD estimate)

### MAIN RELIGION

Islam

### GOVERNMENT

Parliamentary Constitutional Monarchy



## Context

Main Religions	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	170,000	1.7
Muslims	9,796,028	95.1
Agnostics	254,222	2.5
Atheists	51,343	0.5

Source<sup>1</sup>

The [Economist Intelligence Unit](#) Democracy Index 2021 classifies Jordan as an authoritarian regime. King Abdullah II and family have the power to appoint governments, approve legislation and dissolve parliament. According to [Middle East Concern](#), “The Constitution of Jordan establishes Islam as the state religion. It affirms the principle of non-discrimination, including on the basis of religion, and states that the free exercise of worship and religious rites are to be safeguarded, provided these are consistent with public order and morality. Under applicable Islamic law, Muslims are effectively prohibited from changing their religion, and women registered as Muslim are not permitted to marry non-Muslims.”

Though generally stable in terms of security, Jordan faced four Islamist attacks between 2016 and 2019. Human rights advocates have accused Jordan’s rulers of using the threat of terrorism to restrict the rights of

citizens and parliament.

Jordan hosts large numbers of refugees, mostly from Iraq and Syria. Several thousand of these are Christians. Tension has increased between moderate and radical Islamic elements in Jordanian society. The US State Department (IRFR 2021) reported that religious leaders continued online hate speech directed towards religious minorities and those who advocated religious moderation.

## How the situation varies by region

The experience of Christians in Jordan is generally the same all over the country, although social control is likely to be higher in rural areas. The south of the country is also known to be more conservatively Islamic.

## Who is affected?

### Communities of expatriate Christians

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

### Historical Christian communities

Orthodox and Roman Catholic communities are the largest categories of Christians. Overall, they enjoy

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

a relatively high level of religious freedom but can experience discrimination, for example in the area of employment.

### Converts to Christianity

Christians with a Muslim background experience the most violations for their faith. If a convert's new faith is discovered, he or she can face pressure and even violence from family, community, government officials, non-Christian religious leaders, and violent religious groups. Children of converts are particularly vulnerable. Registered as Muslims, children are supposed to live Muslim lives outside their homes, including attending Islamic classes.

### Non-traditional Christian communities

After converts, Christians from Evangelical, Baptist, and Pentecostal congregations face the most opposition, in particular those active in outreach. They are especially scrutinized by the intelligence service and have reportedly suffered from government pressure and job blocks. Most non-traditional Christian communities are not recognized as churches, but as societies. Attempts to obtain equivalent status as other church denominations have consistently been resisted.



## Main sources of persecution and discrimination

### Islamic oppression:

Converts from Islam to Christianity face the highest levels of pressure and even violence from family and community, including religious and ethnic leaders. All Christians can be subject to government monitoring and are at risk of Jordanians being radicalized by Islamic State (IS) ideology. The government has imposed Islamic values and laws on society, although it still promotes tolerance and peaceful coexistence with other religions.

### Clan oppression:

This especially affects Christians with a Muslim background. Jordan's society is largely tribal, especially outside the major cities, and is embedded in Jordanian nationalism. After the mass influx of Palestinians into Jordan after the 1967 war with Israel, Jordan became divided into pure Jordanian "East Bankers" and Palestinian/Jordanian "West Bankers". East Bankers have a social, political and economic advantage.



# How are men and women differently affected?

## WOMEN

Female converts from Islam are the most vulnerable to persecution, with the family typically being the greatest source of pressure. Women risk house arrest, isolation, beatings, sexual harassment, forced marriage, and in extreme cases may be killed to retain family “honor”. Female converts cannot officially marry male Christians, and face their movements being restricted by the state and by families, for instance to prevent her from leaving the country. Personal status laws facilitate house arrest and forced marriages, while apostasy laws enable annulled marriages and loss of child custody.

- Denied custody of children
- Denied legal ability to marry Christian spouse
- Enforced religious dress code
- Forced divorce
- Forced marriage
- Incarceration by family / house arrest
- Targeted seduction
- Travel bans / restrictions on movement
- Violence – death
- Violence – physical
- Violence – sexual
- Violence – verbal

## MEN

Economic discrimination affects all Christians, via unemployment, denied job progression and financial extortion. This causes familial financial issues and feelings of worthlessness for men and, alongside other pressures, can prompt men to emigrate. Under Sharia, marriages between Muslim women and non-Muslim men are not allowed. For the marriage to be legal, the man must convert to Islam. This makes legal marriage impossible between a Christian man who is

not a convert and a Christian woman with a Muslim background. There are further difficulties in the honor-shame culture, where families can attack, reject, and expel men from their homes due to their choice of religion. The state pressures men through intelligence services interviews, especially church leaders.

- Denied legal ability to marry Christian spouse
- Economic harassment via work / job / business
- Forced out of home / expulsion
- 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	49	65
2022	39	66
2021	38	64
2020	33	64
2019	31	65

*Jordan's score decreased by one point compared to WWL 2022. This small difference is mainly due to a lower number of reported violent incidents. For example, there were no reports this year of Christians who had to leave their homes and find another place to stay inside or outside the country. Other incidents continue to be reported, such as physical abuse of mainly converts from Islam.*



©Unsplash

# Examples of violence in the reporting period

Details of places and dates cannot be provided for security reasons. For the WWL 2023 reporting period:

- Christians detained: Converts and Christians involved in outreach can be called in regularly for questioning. It is unknown beforehand how long this will take, it can vary from 20 minutes to 12 days.
- Christians sexually harassed: Women who do not dress as a Muslim (i.e. who do not wear a hijab) risk harassment as it creates a profile of vulnerability. It is estimated that at least 100 Christian women were sexually harassed for this reason. Therefore, many Christian women choose not to use public transport or taxi, especially at night.
- Several converts and Christians who are active in aiding and discipling converts have been physically or mentally abused, usually by the families of the converts.

WWL Year	Christians detained	Christians physically or mentally abused	Christians raped and/or sexually assaulted	Christians imprisoned or punished by the government
2023	10*	10*	10*	1
2022	10*	10*	100*	0

*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

Though not criminalized, leaving Islam is not allowed. Converts whose faith is discovered can be referred to a Sharia Court, where he/she would be found “without religion” and have all contracts broken, including marriage. Converts are frequently targeted for monitoring and may face harassment from the secret police, be prevented from public sector employment and be ostracized within their communities. Women are especially likely to face house arrest, forced marriages and other measures intended to restore “family honor”. If Christians speak about their faith to Muslims, this can easily be understood as an attempt at evangelizing (which is forbidden in Jordan) and a threat to national security.

## Family life

Children of converts from Islam, or children of a Christian mother and Muslim father, are automatically registered as Muslim, and it is not possible to change this. This means the child will be required to attend Islamic classes at school. In the case of divorce, those who have left Islam lose custody of any children according to Islamic law.



### Community life

Monitoring (including phone calls and social media usage) is especially intense for known converts from Islam or for those active in evangelism. Cases have been reported where Christians have repeatedly lost or been denied the opportunity of employment because of their conversion. Promotion in the government and armed forces has a pro-Muslim bias, although nine parliamentary seats are reserved for Christians and Christians have been selected to work as ministers on a regular basis. Since most Jordanian women wear the hijab, Christian women are more obvious in public settings and are often viewed as dressing inappropriately and can thus become subjected to harassment.

### National life

The Constitution of Jordan establishes Islam as the state religion and Sharia as the principal source of legislation. Officially leaving Islam to convert to another religion is illegal (as is non-Islamic evangelism). This is against Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. There is no legal mechanism for changing official religious affiliation from Islam to another (or no) religion, based on the apostasy provisions of Islamic law. In light of the current cyber-crime laws and the government's history of arrests, freedom of speech is limited. Christians understand the need to avoid deliberately provocative statements, especially statements that are critical of Islam, the Crown, the military or statements that could be construed as proselytizing. It is a criminal offense in Jordan to insult Islam.

### Church life

There is a level of routine monitoring of church activities, ostensibly for the protection of churches. However, this monitoring could be used against churches if provocative messages or activities were detected, or if Muslims were observed to be attending. The sale of Bibles and the distribution of Christian materials is only permitted in designated places, such as within recognized churches and adjacent church book stores, but not in ordinary markets or bookshops.



## International obligations & rights violated

Jordan 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)

Jordan 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 loss of child custody in the case of divorce (ICCPR Art. 18)
- Children of Christian converts are automatically registered as Muslim (ICCPR Art. 18 and CRC Art. 14)
- Christians are falsely accused and detained because of their faith (ICCPR Art. 19)
- If arrested, Christians experience beatings and pressure to renounce their faith (ICCPR Arts. 18 and 10)
- Christian women and girls are sexually abused because of their faith (ICCPR Art. 7)

## Situation of other religious minorities

Jordan's systems tend to discriminate against communities belonging to non-Sunni dimensions, for instance Shiites, Baha'i, Druze, Buddhists, Hindus, Iraqi Mandaean, and Jehovah's Witnesses, all of which are not officially recognized. It is reportedly harder for a Sunni to convert to Shiite Islam than to convert to Christianity.



Jordanian woman reading Bible in Arabic.

### Open Doors in Jordan

In cooperation with local partners and churches, Open Doors is supporting the Church in Jordan through:

- Training
- Relief and rehabilitation

Open Doors also raises prayer support for Christians in Jordan.

#### 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.*

---