

WORLD WATCH LIST 2022

SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.
35

Tunisia



LEVELS OF VIOLENCE AND PRESSURE



Each of the six categories is scored out of a maximum of 16.7 points. The categories added together total 100 points (6 x 16.7 = 100).¹ Red = extreme level, orange = very high, yellow = high

Key findings

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)

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

Due to such factors, most Tunisian converts to Christianity cannot worship openly and choose to hide their faith. The hostility and pressure they face from society makes it dangerous for Christians to share their faith with their family members or friends. They also find it difficult to gather for worship due to the risks any possible exposure would entail, while being monitored by the Tunisian security services.

Quick facts

LEADER

President Kais Saied

POPULATION

12,019,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

22,800 (0.2%)²

MAIN RELIGION

Islam

GOVERNMENT

Parliamentary Republic



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Context

Main Religions	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	22,800	0.2
Muslims	11,959,000	99.5
Atheists	3,900	0.0
Agnostics	28,100	0.2

Source³

In 2011, the so-called ‘Tunisian Revolution’ started because of high unemployment, poor living conditions, corruption and a general lack of freedom. President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali was overthrown, and the Arab Spring was initiated across the wider region. After elections under a new constitution were held in 2014 and 2019, coalitions of secularist and Islamist parties emerged. However, the many governments (more than 10 in less than a decade) continued to struggle with economic challenges and political instability. Though still seen as a ‘flawed democracy’, Tunisia showed signs of future stability and increasing civil liberties. However, on 25 July

2021 President Saied suspended parliament and took over power. Promising to fight the endemic corruption, it remains unclear whether he will restore the democracy. After the COVID-19 pandemic, the key challenges for the government remain the same; reviving the economy, and decreasing the high levels of (youth) unemployment and corruption.

According to World Christian Database 2021, 99.5% of Tunisians are Muslims. The majority are adherents of Sunni Islam, with most following the [Maliki tradition](#). Despite the French legacy of ‘laicite’ (secularism) among the urban and educated elite, Islam is very influential and the Constitution recognizes Islam as state religion.

How the situation varies by region

Converts from Islam to Christianity have most to fear from their own family members and society, especially in the country’s more conservative south. Urban

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

³Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2021)

areas, especially the capital Tunis, offer possibilities for converts to escape family pressure and live their faith in more anonymity. Violent Islamic militants are active in the southern border areas and target Christians indiscriminately, if the opportunity arises.

Who is affected?

Communities of expatriate Christians

Expatriate Christians are relatively free, although public evangelism is not tolerated.

Historical Christian communities

This category is included in the 'Communities of expatriate Christians'.

Converts to Christianity

Converts to Christianity with a Muslim background can face violations from their family members. However, they are more or less free to seek information about the Christian faith, particularly content posted online.

Non-traditional Christian communities

This category is included in the 'Communities of expatriate Christians'.

Main sources of persecution and discrimination

Islamic oppression:

At the family level, converts from Islam to Christianity can suffer domestic incarceration from their families. At the political level, Islamist political parties are still influential. The links between some Islamist movements and organized corruption should not be underestimated. They both contribute to significant levels of fear among Christians.



How are men and women differently affected?

WOMEN

High levels of sexual harassment and domestic violence, combined with ongoing societal discriminatory norms, demonstrate a gender gap. This is exploited as a means of religious persecution. Converts from Islam face the greatest breadth of persecution (especially in the traditional family context), including beatings, home expulsion, house arrest, death threats and rape. Married converts face divorce and loss of child custody, whereas single converts may be forced into marriage. The main source of persecution is the dominating male in the family, who may restrict access to Christian communities and materials.

- Abduction
- Denied access to Christian religious materials
- Denied custody of children
- Discrimination/harassment via education
- Forced divorce
- Forced marriage
- Forced out of home - expulsion
- Incarceration by family/house arrest
- Violence - physical
- Violence - psychological
- Violence - sexual

MEN

New converts are by far the most vulnerable Christians in Tunisia. Male converts face intimidation, job loss, denied access to communities, police detainment, beatings and death threats. They may further be ostracized for bringing shame on their families by leaving Islam. Pressured by their families, Muslim wives will leave a Christian convert, and he may be denied inheritance or even access to his possessions. The severity of backlash will vary according to his social and political standing. When a man is persecuted, his family becomes vulnerable and lacks protection.

- Discrimination/harassment via education
- Economic harassment via work/job/business
- Forced divorce
- Forced out of home - expulsion
- Imprisonment by government
- Violence - physical
- Violence - psychological

WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution score out of 100
2022	35	66.31
2021	26	67.49
2020	34	63.60
2019	37	62.52
2018	30	62.34

There was a one-point drop in score in WWL 2022, a result of the decreasing violence score which fell from 7.4 points in WWL 2021 to 6.5 in WWL 2022. This was mainly due to fewer attacks on church buildings and properties of Christians, as well as a decrease 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.

Examples in the reporting period

- A Moroccan 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.

WWL Year	Churches or Christian buildings attacked or closed	Christians detained	Christians physically or mentally abused	Christians' private property damaged or confiscated
2022	4	2	53	11
2021	5	17	12	17

This table includes only a few categories of faith-based violence during the reporting period - see [here](#) for full results. Since many incidents go unreported, the numbers must be understood as minimum figures. In cases where it has been impossible to count exactly, a symbolic round figure (10, 100 or 1000) is given which in reality could be significantly higher.



Private life

Converts from Islam to Christianity experience severe pressure from their families, especially in rural areas. They risk ostracization, imprisonment or economic boycotts. Meeting other Christians and owning Christian materials is extremely difficult.

Family life

Tunisian society views non-Muslims as foreign and discriminates against these groups as a means of coercing assimilation into wider Sunni Tunisian culture. Non-Muslims are prohibited from adopting children in Tunisia. Spouses who are discovered to be Christian may be divorced and lose custody of their children. Children of converts must attend mandatory Islamic classes and may experience social ostracization, harassment, and even violence because of the religion of their parents.

Community life

Converts, especially in rural areas, experience harassment and social isolation by the community. Forced marriage to Muslim men is commonly used as a threat to young female converts. Converts have also been obstructed in their university studies, discriminated against when applying for jobs or have their businesses boycotted. Tunisian Christians therefore tend to seek employment with foreign institutions to avoid discrimination. Monitoring is frequent and police officers regularly question Tunisian Christians about their activities. Even a routine request for a new passport can lead to detailed interrogation.

National life

Sharia law is not the 'principal source of legislation' as in many other Arab countries, but Islam is still the state religion. Authorities generally view non-Muslims as outsiders, not deserving of equal status. These sentiments are supported by a hostile media apparatus which seeks to scapegoat and spread misinformation about Christians.

Church life

Tunisian converts cannot register their churches and no new church has been granted official registration since Tunisia's independence in 1956. 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. Selling Christian materials is not forbidden, and Bibles can be bought in secular bookstores. However, distributing Christian materials for free is seen as proselytizing and is forbidden.

International obligations & rights violated

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)

Situation of other religious minorities

Bahai are not officially recognized and cannot have their own place of worship. However, they have had some constructive dialogues with government officials in the recent past. Jewish groups worship freely, and the government provides security for synagogues and partially subsidized restoration and maintenance costs. The Sunni-Shia divide has been relatively peaceful in Tunisia, although Shia Muslims can experience discrimination, and public figures have spoken out against Shia Islam in the past.



Open Doors in Tunisia

In cooperation with local partners and churches, Open Doors is supporting the church in North Africa through the following activities:

- Leadership
- Discipleship
- Ministry
- Livelihood
- Prayer support

About this brief

- This brief is a summary of the full Country Dossier produced annually by World Watch Research (WWR), the research department of Open Doors International. It may be used and distributed free of charge, but please always acknowledge the source as: © 2021 Open Doors International.
- The WWL 2022 reporting period was 01 October 2020 - 30 September 2021.
- The full Country Dossier for this country can be accessed [here](#) (password: freedom). The latest update of WWL methodology, as well as the complete WWL 2022 ranking and reports, can be found [here](#) (password: freedom).

All photos in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.
