

WORLD WATCH LIST 2022

SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.
36

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).

Key findings

A journalist [who 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.”

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

12,047,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

22,500¹

MAIN RELIGION

Islam

GOVERNMENT

Parliamentary Republic



Context

Main Religions	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	22,500	0.2
Muslims	11,987,000	99.5
Agnostics	28,500	0.2
Atheists	3,600	0.0

Source²

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 seized power. Promising to fight the endemic corruption, it remains unclear whether he will restore

the democracy. A constitutional referendum in July 2022 turned Tunisia into a presidential republic, with almost absolute power for the president.

According to World Christian Database 2021, 99.5% of Tunisians are Muslims. Despite the French legacy of “laïcité” (secularism) among the urban and educated elite, Islam is very influential and the Constitution states that Tunisia belongs to the Islamic Ummah. 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. All Christian denominations have functioning churches in the capital Tunis and are mainly serving expatriate Christians residing in the country.

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 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.

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

² Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2022)

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 under “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 under “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 president seems committed to keep Tunisia an Islamic country, with little respect for the (religious) rights of Tunisian 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
- Forced divorce
- Forced marriage
- Forced out of home – expulsion
- Incarceration by family / house arrest
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological
- Violence – sexual
- Violence – verbal

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 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	36	67
2022	35	66
2021	26	67
2020	34	64
2019	37	63

Average pressure on Christians in Tunisia slightly increased during WWL 2023, resulting in a one point increase in score, while the violence score remained very high. On July 22, President Kais Saied consolidated his de facto coup via a constitutional referendum that returned Tunisia to one-man rule. Although the new constitution is ambiguous regarding Freedom of Religion and Belief, it is feared that the current high levels of government monitoring of Tunisian Christians will only further increase.

Examples in the reporting period

During the WWL 2023 reporting period:

- Several Tunisian and foreign Christians were detained and/or interrogated about their activities.
- Many Tunisian Christians experienced harassment from their families, with a number of them being ostracized and forced out of the family home.
- A number of house churches and Christian buildings had to endure violence from members of the society.
- At least three Tunisian Christians, mainly young women, were forced into a marriage with a Muslim spouse.
- Several Tunisian Christians had to relocate inside or outside the country due to (family) pressure.

WWL Year	Christians physically or mentally abused	Christians' private property damaged or confiscated	Christians raped and/or sexually assaulted	Churches or Christian buildings attacked or closed
2023	34	7	10*	4
2022	53	11	10*	4

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

Converts from Islam to Christianity experience severe pressure from their families, especially in rural areas. Meeting other Christians and owning Christian materials can be dangerous. They risk ostracization, forced isolation, and economic boycotts.

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 still dominates national life. 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. Although selling Bibles is not prohibited, in practice there are many difficulties to do so publicly. 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

Bahá'í are not officially recognized and cannot have their own place of worship. However, they have recently had some constructive dialogues with government officials. 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:

- 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: © 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.
