

WORLD WATCH LIST 2023

SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.
41

Turkey



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

The very strong *Religious nationalism* in society puts a lot of pressure on Christians. Nationalism and Islam are intrinsically linked and anyone who is not a Muslim, particularly a convert or someone who openly lives out their different faith, is not seen to be a loyal Turk. The government has started to target foreign (Western) Christians, and has also banned foreign Christians with Turkish spouses and children from the country.

Conversion from Islam to Christianity is not legally forbidden. However, converts from Islam are pressurized by their families and communities to return to Islam. Some Christians are therefore compelled to lead a double life and hide their conversion. Once discovered, a Christian with a Muslim background may be threatened with divorce and the loss of inheritance rights by family members. Christians from all categories of Christian communities have limited access to state employment, and experience discrimination in private employment, especially where employers have ties to the government. Since religious affiliation is still recorded on ID cards (nowadays via an electronic chip), it is easy to discriminate against Christian job applicants.

Quick facts

LEADER

President Recep Tayyip Erdogan

POPULATION

85,562,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

171,000¹

MAIN RELIGION

Islam

GOVERNMENT

Presidential Republic



Context

Main Religions	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	171,000	0.2
Muslims	84,148,000	98.3
Agnostics	932,000	1.1
Others	155,500	0.2

OTHERS include Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.

Source²

Turkey is a presidential republic, currently under the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. According to Turkish legislation based on the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne, only four religious groups are recognized by the state: Sunni Islam, Greek Orthodoxy, Armenian Apostolics, and Judaism. A citizen's religion is recorded in official documents, although since 2017 new ID cards no longer have a written entry for religion anymore. However, religious affiliation is still registered on the ID card's electronic chip, and it is still common for government officials to ask for one's religion.

Turkish legislation does not allow the training of church ministers in private education centers. As a result, all Greek Orthodox and Armenian Apostolic seminaries were forced to shut down in the 1970s and 1980s and remain closed to this day. But under the

guarantees of the Lausanne Treaty, the Greek and Armenian communities still maintain church grade schools accredited by the Ministry of Education. The Catholic and Protestant churches are able to provide catechetical training for their children on church premises. Turkish Christians from a Muslim background have no facilities at all.

Though officially a secular state since Atatürk's reforms in the early 20th century, Turkey is Islamizing under nationalist President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, particularly since the failed 2016 coup. The Turkish Constitution, while not technically limiting freedom of religion, promotes Turkish national character and Sunni Islam above all other identities. Due to increasing Islamization, it has reportedly become harder for women (both Christian and secular) who do not wear a head-covering to obtain employment.

Purchasing premises for church use can prove difficult, since Turkish law stipulates that only certain buildings can be designated as churches. Whether permission is granted will depend on the inclination of the mayor and the attitude of the local population. Non-Muslims are tacitly banned from jobs in state administration and the security forces. Non-Muslims state that when they enlist for military service, their religious affiliation is noted by their superiors and there is also a "security check". Conversion is not prohibited by law. However, conversion to Christianity is widely considered to be unacceptable.

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)

How the situation varies by region

Historical Christian groups like the Armenian and Assyrian (Syriac) churches face high pressure and hostility in south-eastern Turkey. For decades, they have been casualties of an ongoing conflict between the Turkish army and Kurdish nationalist groups. Most Turkish Christian communities are in the Western coastal cities, including Istanbul. These cities tend to be more moderate and secular, while inland areas are more conservative, Islamic, and socially hostile towards Christians, including converts from Islam to Christianity.

Who is affected?

Communities of expatriate Christians

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

Historical Christian communities

Historical Christian communities include the Armenian Apostolic Orthodox and Greek Orthodox churches (the only churches recognized by the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923), and the Assyrian, Syriac Orthodox, and Syriac Catholic churches. All these are monitored regularly and subjected to controls and limitations by the government. Their members are considered “foreign” in many official dealings, and they encounter legal and bureaucratic obstacles, as well as police and community harassment. For example, the Armenian and Greek Orthodox churches require permission from the Turkish government to select new church leaders.

Converts to Christianity

Converts to Christianity from a Muslim background bear the brunt of rights violations in Turkey. Pressure comes from family, the community, and even local authorities. They are considered traitors to the Turkish identity.

Non-traditional Christian communities

Non-traditional Christian communities include Baptists and Pentecostals. This category is blended with the community of converts to Christianity. They mostly exist as small groups and meet in private homes, which can lead to opposition from neighbors. A new, growing group of Christians in Turkey consists of Christian refugees from neighboring countries, including Iran. They face high levels of social hostility, primarily because of their refugee status, but their faith makes them extra vulnerable.

Main sources of persecution and discrimination

Islamic oppression combined with Religious nationalism - Islamic:

Fierce, fanatical nationalism affects all ethnic minorities in Turkey. Conversion to Christianity from Islam is seen as an offense to family and nation; converts face harassment and familial, communal, and economic exclusion. The general opinion is that a true Turk is a Muslim. Conversion is not only a question of family honor being damaged, it is also seen as “insulting Turkishness”. This can result in court cases and imprisonment. Some converts may even face threats of violence from radical nationalist Islamist groups. Other ethnic minorities (such as Greeks, Armenians, and Syriacs) face similar societal pressure and violence, as well as legal challenges and economic exclusion.

Ethno-religious hostility:

This source has grown stronger in the context of the Kurdish conflict. Syriac Christians in the south-eastern region particularly feel the pressure from the Syrian civil war and are caught between Kurdish clans, the government, and the Kurdish militant group, PKK. Tribal leaders use their power to push out the Syriacs from their homeland in the south-east.

Clan oppression:

Tribal law and customs still play an important role, especially in the eastern provinces of Turkey. Converts from Islam are likely to face more pressure there, as conversion to Christianity is not only seen as a betrayal of Islam, but also of family and clan.

Dictatorial paranoia:

Since the failed coup of July 2016, President Erdoğan’s government has cracked down against opposition, becoming increasingly anti-democratic and openly restricting freedom throughout Turkish society. The media have been curtailed, with President Erdoğan [claiming](#) that “democracy and free press are incompatible” and journalists are being imprisoned.

How are men and women differently affected?

WOMEN

Prevailing culture and lack of implementation of equal rights has allowed some gender inequality and high levels of domestic violence. Converts are most vulnerable, particularly in rural areas, as conversion contradicts the expectations for women to bring honor to their family. Women face house arrest, physical and sexual abuse, harassment and rejection, causing some to flee their homes to find safety. Within a shame and honor culture, many abuse victims carry trauma alone. Women also face pressure in the public sphere, such as expectations to meet Islamic ideals of dress/conduct.

- Denied access to social community / networks
- Economic harassment via work / job / business
- Enforced religious dress code
- Forced out of home – expulsion
- Incarceration by family / house arrest
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological
- Violence – sexual

MEN

Institutional and communal discrimination and hostility affects all Christians, but men face additional pressures of interwoven religious and cultural expectations. They are expected to defend Islam and Turkishness, closely aligned in public perception, often preventing men from ever entering church. Christian men and boys can be detained, threatened, arrested and mistreated by the authorities. They face job loss, inheritance loss, family rejection, or can be deported (especially expatriate Christians). The military service environment can also lead to

discrimination and harassment. Work in both the public and private sectors is difficult.

- Denied inheritance or possessions
- Discrimination/harassment via education
- Economic harassment via work / job / business
- Military / militia conscription / service against conscience
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological
- Violence – verbal

WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution rounded score out of 100
2023	41	66
2022	42	65
2021	25	69
2020	36	63
2019	26	66

The average pressure on Christians increased very slightly, with an increase in reported violence being the main reason for the one-point increase in score. In the WWL 2023 reporting period, a higher number of church buildings were damaged, desecrated, converted into mosques or otherwise attacked. In Turkey, Islam is totally blended with fierce nationalism. There is a high level of distrust towards Christians, especially in inland Turkey, making public outreach hard, and resulting in high levels of societal opposition. During the WWL 2023 reporting period, it has become prevalent that especially Christian asylum seekers and refugees, including converts from Islam to Christianity from Iran, Afghanistan and Syria, face very high levels of discrimination and abuse.



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Examples of violence in the reporting period

- **December 2021:** Graffiti stating the phrase “Allah 1” was sprayed on the door of the Kadıköy Protestant Church and two other churches in Istanbul.
- **December 2021:** On Christmas Eve, the former Hagia Sophia church in Enez, close to the Greek border, was converted into a mosque. The opening ceremony was performed by the head of the Directorate for Religious Affairs, who also held a similar ceremony in 2020, when the Hagia Sophia church in Istanbul was converted into a mosque.
- **Entry bans:** The Turkish government continued to ban some expatriate Christians from (re)entering the country, often on vague security grounds.
- **Christian refugees:** Christian refugees, including converts from Islam to Christianity, faced high levels of abuse and discrimination, both by society and authorities. Converts from Islam to Christianity remain in precarious conditions, without legal status. Many of those Christians are Iranian, but Syrian, Afghani and Iraqi converts are also present, among other nationalities.

WWL Year	Churches or Christian buildings attacked or closed	Christians physically or mentally abused	Christians’ private property damaged or confiscated	Christians imprisoned or punished by the government
2023	7	10*	1	1
2022	4	10*	1	1

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

Public expressions of non-Muslim faiths can result in harassment. Displaying Christian symbols can provoke hostility and physical violence. Traditional Christians are socially and economically excluded from wider Turkish society. Converts from Islam to Christianity can lose their jobs, face harassment from family and friends, or receive threats after their new faith has come to be known.

Family life

Children of Christian converts are often harassed and bullied because their family is perceived as having betrayed both the faith and the nation. Children whose parents are either expatriates or who belong to one of the historical Christian communities are also seen as “enemies of Turkey” because they are viewed as being part of the “Christian West”.

The Turkish educational curriculum is heavily influenced by Turkish nationalism and portrays Christianity as foreign and hostile to Turkish society.



Applications for Christian cemeteries have been denied in several parts of the country. In those areas, Christians can only be buried according to Christian rites in sections reserved for all non-Muslims, or in the nearest historically Christian cemetery (sometimes more than 500 km away).

Community life

Christians have no access to state employment and experience discrimination in private employment. Islamic education is compulsory. While non-Muslim children can opt out, they are likely to face ostracization and discrimination from teachers and classmates. The media is heavily influenced by nationalist pressure from the state and regularly attacks non-Muslim minorities. Christians are consistently scapegoated and discriminated against by newspapers and television as a way of both suppressing Christian voices and intimidating more tolerant Turks into silence.

National life

For Christians, access to public sector employment and other social and economic opportunities is highly restricted. Article 301 of the Turkish Penal Code states that, “A person who publicly denigrates the Turkish Nation, the Republic or the Grand National Assembly of Turkey, shall be punishable by imprisonment,” meaning that Christians must exercise extreme caution when expressing themselves in public.

Church life

It is impossible to register as a new religious community. Although there is an option for churches to register as an “association”, this is also a difficult process and some applications have been denied. Establishing a foundation with the aim of supporting a new religious community is also prohibited.

Obtaining permits for building, repairing, or renovating church buildings is a long and difficult process, made more so by anti-Christian sentiments within the bureaucracy. Training of Christian leaders legally is impossible. The seminaries of the historical Christian communities were closed down in the 1970s and have remained closed ever since, so only unofficial training can take place.

International obligations & rights violated

Turkey 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)

Turkey 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, 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)
- Churches are attacked by members of the state task force (ICCPR Art. 18)
- 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

Both the Turkish government and society have become increasingly hostile towards religious minority groups such as Alevites and Jews, and ethnic minorities such as Yazidis and Kurds. In November 2018, [the Appeals Court ruled](#) that the government should pay the electricity expenses of cemevis (Alevi houses of worship), just as it does for mosques. The European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) gave a similar ruling in 2016, which was also ignored by the government.



Open Doors in Turkey

Open Doors is raising prayer for believers in difficult situations and prayer, in general, for Turkey.

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.
