

WORLD WATCH LIST 2022

SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

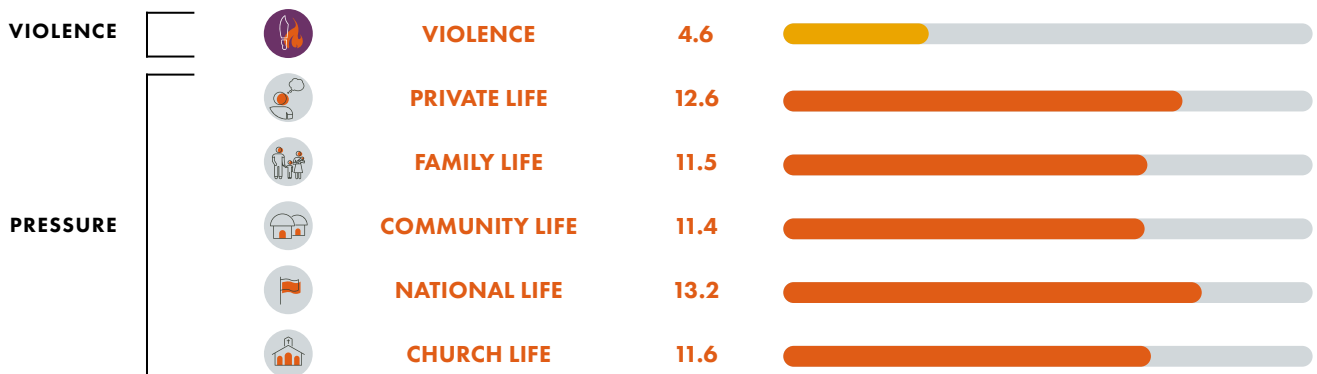
WORLD WATCH LIST NO.
42

Turkey



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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

The Turkish government is increasingly intolerant towards religious minorities. The conversion of the Hagia Sophia (once Christianity's most important church and later a (secular) museum respecting both Christians and Muslims) into a mosque in July 2020 is an indication of this. Christians from ethnic minorities (e.g., Greeks, Armenians, Syriacs) encounter all kinds of legal and bureaucratic obstacles. Conversion from Islam to Christianity is not illegal but converts are under pressure by their families and communities to return to Islam, which can include threat of divorce and loss of inheritance rights. Christians, both from ethnic minorities and converts from Islam to Christianity, are discriminated against by wider society. Christian expatriates, even those with Turkish spouses and children, have been banned from the country on unclear grounds.

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

Quick facts

LEADER

President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan

POPULATION

84,515,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

170,000 (0.2%)²

MAIN RELIGION

Islam

GOVERNMENT

Presidential Republic



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Context

Main Religions	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	170,000	0.2
Muslims	83,073,000	98.3
Agnostics	972,000	1.2
Others	149,900	0.2

OTHERS include Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian. Source³

Christianity has a long history in Turkey. Under Constantine (Roman emperor from 306 to 337 AD) the city of Byzantium (also known as Constantinople, the current Istanbul) became and remained a hub for Christianity for thousands of years until the Ottoman Turks conquered this empire in 1453. Since then, Christians in Turkey have been living in a Muslim-dominated country.

After the First World War, in the newly formed state of Turkey, the Greek, Armenian and Syriac minorities faced heavy discrimination. Pressure built in the years up to 1923, when the Treaty of Lausanne was concluded. Millions of Christians died during forced removals. A large part of the Greek minority was forced to leave Turkey and moved to Greece, weakening not just the position of the Greek Orthodox Church but also the wider Christian witness in Turkey. Until today, Turkish legislation based on the Lausanne Treaty only

recognizes four religious groups: Sunni Islam, Greek Orthodoxy, Armenian Apostolics and Judaism.

Though officially a secular state since Ataturk's reforms in the early 20th century, Turkey is Islamizing under nationalist President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, particularly since the failed 2016 coup. For example, the number of religious schools has increased from 450 to more than 5,000 today, as part of Erdoğan's efforts to raise a 'pious generation'. The Turkish Constitution, while not technically limiting freedom of religion, promotes Turkish national character and Sunni Islam above all other identities.

Purchasing premises for church use can prove difficult since Turkish law stipulates that only certain buildings can be designated as churches. Whether or not permission is granted will depend on the inclination of the mayor and 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'.

How the situation varies by region

Historical Christian groups like the Armenian and Assyrian (Syriac) churches face high pressure and

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

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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

Expatriate Christians are included in the 'non-traditional Christian communities'.

Historical Christian communities

Historical Christian communities include the Armenian Apostolic Orthodox and Greek Orthodox churches (the only churches recognized in 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, 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 a case of '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 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

Equal rights are only as strong as their legal implementation, a problematic situation that can result in gender inequality, with 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

MEN

Media, police, bureaucratic 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 stepping foot into a church. Christian men and boys can be detained, threatened, arrested and mistreated by the authorities. They face job loss, inheritance loss or family rejection, or can be deported (this mostly applies to 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
- Imprisonment by government
- 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 score out of 100
2022	42	64.78
2021	25	68.95
2020	36	63.40
2019	26	65.50
2018	31	61.97

The country score fell four points in WWL 2022 compared to WWL 2021. Although the average pressure on Christians increased from 11.9 to 12.0 points, the decrease in total score was caused by a lower violence score, from 9.3 to 4.6 points. Less church buildings have been attacked and no Christians have been killed compared to WWL 2021. This is likely the result of the (lockdown) measures against the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused a significant drop in Christian activities and made the wider church less visible. Islam is totally blended with fierce nationalism, and aggressive rhetoric from the government has left less space for other voices, including the Christian one.



Examples of violence in the reporting period

- **In May 2021**, a church in the Syriac village of Kovankaya in south east Turkey was attacked, allegedly by members of the Turkish security forces.
- **In April 2021**, Syriac Orthodox monk Father Sefer Bileçen was sentenced to more than two years in prison for providing bread and water to some visitors. According to the Turkish prosecutor, the visitors were members of the banned Kurdish PKK movement.
- During the WWL 2022 reporting period, the Turkish government continued to ban expatriate Christians from (re)entering the country, often on vague security grounds. Many of those Christians had been working and living for years in Turkey.

WWL Year	Churches or Christian buildings attacked or closed	Christians imprisoned or punished by the government	Christians physically or mentally abused	Christians forced to flee their countries
2022	4	1	10	40
2021	11	0	22	100

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

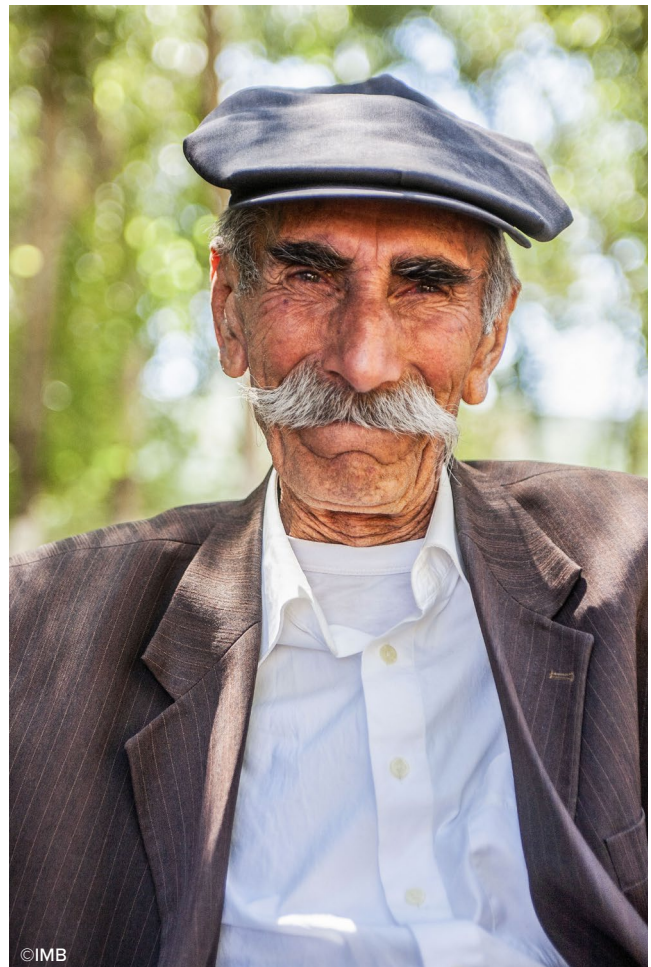
Public expressions of non-Muslim faiths can result in harassment. Displaying Christian symbols has provoked hostility and physical violence. Traditional Christians are socially and economically excluded from wider Turkish society. Converts from Islam to Christianity can lose their jobs, face harassment by 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 500km 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. The 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, 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)
- 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 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: © 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.
