

World
Watch
Research

WWL 2023 Summary of Trends

May 2023 edition



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Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

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Brief note on methodology, access to further information and copyright

- The WWL 2023 reporting period was 1 October 2021 - 30 September 2022.
- The latest update of WWL Methodology together with various other background documents can be found on the [World Watch List Documentation](https://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/)¹ page of the Open Doors Analytical website.
- WWL 2023 Full Country Dossiers giving in-depth information on the situation of Christians in the 76 countries listed are available on the Open Doors Analytical website page under the heading [Full country dossiers](http://opendoorsanalytical.org/country-dossiers/).²
- The definition of persecution used in WWL analysis is: “Any hostility experienced as a result of one’s identification with Christ. This can include hostile attitudes, words and actions towards Christians”. This broad definition includes (but is not limited to) restrictions, pressure, discrimination, opposition, disinformation, injustice, intimidation, mistreatment, marginalization, oppression, intolerance, infringement, violation, ostracism, hostilities, harassment, abuse, violence, ethnic cleansing and genocide.
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¹ <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/> (password: freedom)

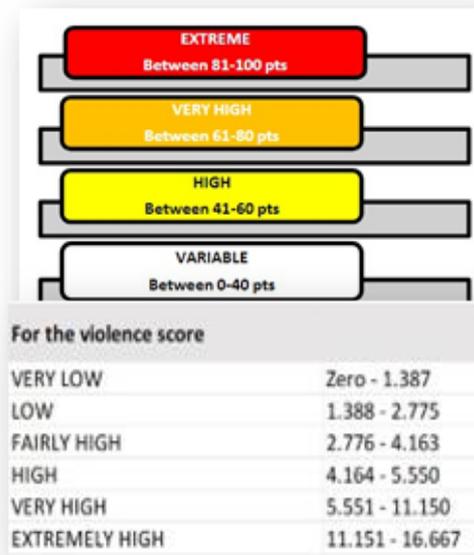
² <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/country-dossiers/> (password: freedom)

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1. Violence in Sub-Saharan Africa has reached new heights



The combined total score for violence for all 26 Sub-Saharan countries that scored at least 41 total points on the Open Doors World Watch List, increased by 8%. Half of those countries have violence scores in the “extremely high” range.

Conditions across Sub-Saharan Africa are ripe for violence. The general background is persistent, expanding political instability and economic hardship. Just as poorer African countries were trying to overcome the destruction of the Covid-19 pandemic, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine pushed food, fertilizer and energy prices higher.

Christians in the region endure these conditions alongside everyone else, but the weak states, and the ineffective governments within them, that span the region have intensified a number of violent trends that are especially threatening to the Church.

It is fertile ground for the **expansion of jihadism**, which has created a pretext for military juntas to overthrow governments, such as in Mali and Burkina Faso. The jihadist movement, which seeks to expand Sharia across the continent, has forced Christians into constant motion, from their homes to displacement camps, or even to other countries. Insecurity, stemming from this experience of forced displacement, can then make Christians even more vulnerable to further

violence. Christian women, in particular, can be easily targeted for sexual attack, while men are more likely to lose their lives.

Especially in Sharia states, the violence often goes hand in hand with serious pressure on Christians in their everyday life. At schools or universities, in employment, just at home or in family circles, Christians can be bullied or seriously mistreated. No Sharia state would provide equal space for the Church.

Organized crime uses Western Africa as a hub for drug trafficking from Latin America to Europe. There is also widespread trafficking of humans and protected wildlife. The experience of Christian leaders in Latin America, where their public witness against organized crime is repaid with bullets, is an ill portent for the African church if organized crime permeates all levels of society. This is especially worrisome if crime mixes with jihadism and **unscrupulous corporations** in the region, which will go over corpses to obtain natural resources and rare minerals. For such enterprises, with whom the Western world is sometimes involved, chaos is good for business. The Church is vulnerable in such violent, chaotic situations.

One particular enterprise, the **Wagner Group**, a supplier of mercenary soldiers with ties to the Kremlin, is causing tremendous suffering for civilians in countries like Libya, CAR, Mali and Mozambique. “The levels of violence committed by Russian mercenaries now exceed civilian targeting by state forces, rebel groups or Islamist insurgents,” The New York Times [reported](#) in August.³ Open Doors’ researchers in those countries are limited in what information they can obtain about Christians, who themselves are under pressure not to speak up against Wagner’s misdeeds.

Survival for many Africans already was a challenge before **changes to the climate** have become evident. Now they have had to leave their homes, and sometimes their country. In such situations, Christians are often doubly vulnerable, as documented in the World Watch Research report, [Church on the Run](#).⁴

2. The China model and its growing number of emulators

China is forging an international alliance to redefine human rights. The apparent success of China, especially in (but not limited to) economic terms is appealing to many leaders around the world. The promise of growth and prosperity, while being able to control all groups and individuals perceived as deviant, has triggered the interest of leaders from all over the world, no matter their ideological background.

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/30/world/africa/wagner-group-civilians-africa.html>

⁴ <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/IDP-Refugee-specific-religious-persecution-report-Church-on-the-run-June-2022.pdf>

China is trying not just to dominate the international agenda, but also to **re-interpret existing (and coining new) human rights**. Some observers call this ‘[rights-free development](#)’.⁵ A glimpse of its ambition can be seen in the UN Human Rights Council [speech given by China’s foreign minister](#) on 22 February 2021,⁶ which stressed not classical notions of God-given rights but the “right” to development and happiness. China is trying to push this revisionism into the mainstream of international diplomacy, partly by attempting to [re-define](#) the tasks of the United Nations⁷ — and, most importantly, by filtering who is allowed to participate in debates on how human rights should be shaped in the future. Countries as diverse as Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Malaysia have headed down this same path, joining such Central Asian states as Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and, of course, Russia.

The **authoritarian drift** can also be seen elsewhere around the globe:

- Middle East and North Africa: Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia and Egypt are just a few examples; Iran and the Gulf States are others. In Turkey, those loyal to President Recep Tayyip Erdogan control the government and most of the media, judiciary and academia.
- Sub-Saharan Africa: Rwanda, Burundi, Uganda and Cameroon. In Nigeria, the security apparatus is largely under federal control, has been saturated by Muslim northerners during President Muhammadu Buhari’s presidency.
- Latin America: Cuba, Venezuela - and Nicaragua, which in 2023 appears for the first time in the top 50 countries of the Open Doors World Watch List, where President Ortega and his wife have tried to silence any dissenting voice.

The mere existence of Christian communities is a thorn in the flesh of the regimes in many of these countries. The more so, if Christian activists raise their voice frustrating the regime’s attempts to control its citizens. Using the language of “stability” and “security”, autocrats put **immense pressure on church leaders** in response to their persistent call for the respect of human rights, free participation of civil society, the rule of law, and election transparency. Those who refuse to support the ruling party can be branded as “troublemakers”, “disturbers of the peace” or even “terrorists”. They face arrest, demolition of church buildings, and the loss of church registration.

3. China’s digital control threatens the Church

As digital tools became more sophisticated, so did the Chinese government. Armed in March 2022 with [sweeping new rules](#)⁸ on [church use of the Internet](#)⁹ and the continuing Covid-19 pandemic as a pretext, Beijing employed censorship, disinformation and unblinking surveillance to ratchet up control of religious groups.

⁵ <https://www.brookings.edu/research/chinas-influence-on-the-global-human-rights-system/>

⁶ <https://thediplomat.com/2021/02/can-china-change-the-definition-of-human-rights/>

⁷ <https://thediplomat.com/2021/09/beijing-and-the-un-50-years-on/>

⁸ <https://international.la-croix.com/news/chinas-new-internet-rules-harbor-sinister-goals/11968>

⁹ <https://www.chinasource.org/resource-library/chinese-church-voices/preparing-for-the-new-internet-religious-information-measures/>

In response, there were reports of some pastors leaving 60-second voice messages on social media platforms such as WeChat, to avoid having to submit sermon details to the authorities. Christian content was still available on some online platforms 2022, but the risk of access continued to increase. The ongoing cat-and-mouse game is leaving less space for the latter.

The advance of technology has empowered Chinese Christians to advance evangelism. But even 3-year-old incidents, such as the raid of an online Christian bookstore that continued to have [repercussions for customers](#)¹⁰ years later, indicate that digital platforms come with **increasing risks** and can have far-reaching negative consequences for Christians.

The tracking apps that collected data to stay ahead of the coronavirus were not phased out in 2022 but redeployed. During the Open Doors World Watch List reporting period, authorities stepped up their efforts to control [social media](#),¹¹ partly by holding tech companies responsible for all [comments](#).¹² As tight as the internet space became for the average Chinese citizen, it arguably became tighter for Christians, as they are **perceived as being allied with Western influences**.

China's much publicized "[Social Credit System](#)" is becoming a **top government priority**,¹³ one that the pandemic only [intensified](#).¹⁴ Physical surveillance has become so [synonymous](#)¹⁵ with Communist Party doctrine that some observers think it is rewriting the terms of the party's contract with society, diminishing its promise of economic improvement and advancing a promise of security and well-being in a more general way.

The very infrastructure of digital communication, which is increasingly mobile, is potentially perilous. Neither the system security of Huawei, the largest and one of the few providers of the 5G mobile standard, nor its links with the People's Liberation Army and the Communist Party, are clear. Nor are the perils confined to China. WeChat warned its users abroad that their [interactions](#)¹⁶ — histories, comments, likes etc. — are sent to data centers in China.

4. Conditions for the Church in Latin America worsen

On the 2022 list, three Latin American countries were ranked in the top 50. On the 2023 list, there are now four: Nicaragua is ranked No. 50 in 2023, the first time the country has appeared within the top 50. It joins Colombia, Cuba and Mexico.

¹⁰ <https://www.csw.org.uk/2021/06/04/report/5291/article.htm>

¹¹ <https://www.prcleader.org/pan>

¹² <https://www.technologyreview.com/2022/06/18/1054452/china-censors-social-media-comments/>

¹³ http://socialcredit.triviumchina.com/what-is-social-credit/?mc_cid=32cc1a240a&mc_eid=cb0c885248

¹⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/09/the-new-normal-chinas-excessive-coronavirus-public-monitoring-could-be-here-to-stay>

¹⁵ <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/2022/09/interview-josh-chin-on-chinas-surveillance-state/>

¹⁶ <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/china/wechat-09082022183307.html>

On average, the total score in each of the four countries increased by 4.2 points, led by the 8-point surge in Nicaragua. The roots of this increase trace back to April 2018, when government repression intensified after public protests. During the WWL 2023 reporting period, President Ortega and his wife have tried to silence any dissenting voice. The Church has been a particular target – buildings damaged, TV stations and colleges closed, religious leaders expelled – because of the reputation of authority and legitimacy it has in the country.

By comparison, in Sub-Saharan Africa, individual country scores in the top 50 rose, on average, by 1.5 points. In the top 50, scores went down, by 0.4 points on average, across Asia.

The higher scores in Latin America translated into higher rankings on the list. Colombia ranks No. 22 on the 2023 list, up from No. 30 a year earlier. Cuba rose 10 spots to No. 27, and Mexico rose 5 spots to No. 38.

What's driving the deteriorating conditions in these four countries? Especially in rural areas, **corrupt and ineffective government** has created space for criminal groups and ethnic leaders to emerge, strengthen and become drivers of persecution. Criminal networks are growing and dominating large territories.

The most frequent violent incidents documented by World Watch Research involve the **targeting of Christians**, and the attacks are increasingly showing signs of cruelty. Christians who stand athwart crime are especially at risk in regions where criminal groups are fighting each other for territorial control. Living out their faith has become a reason why Christians are being forced to flee their communities and sometimes the country, for safety.

The special, **semi-autonomous legal status** that indigenous populations enjoy in parts of Latin America is a double-edged sword. Free from some measures of central-government authority over local culture and customs, they also are without central-government assistance to resist criminal elements. Indigenous citizens who abandon community traditions to become Christian are doubly vulnerable, exposed not only to criminal activity but to harassment by indigenous leadership over their apostasy.

Government repression in Nicaragua, Cuba and Venezuela has intensified against those who are seen as opposition voices. In Nicaragua especially, communist repression of church leaders became increasingly visible during the WWL 2023 reporting period.

There is **growing antagonism** toward church presence in the public sphere, especially toward the church's advocacy for Biblical gender teaching. Marches and demonstrations in favor of gender self-determination regularly include attacks on church buildings. The pressure leads to Christian self-censorship.

5. The Church in the Middle East is reduced and still under pressure

The storm may be over, and there are isolated reasons for Christians to take encouragement (see the Good News item, below), but overall, the situation remains disheartening.

On the one hand, the visible and political influence of the **Muslim Brotherhood** has seriously reduced. On the other, dictatorship has returned to Tunisia, the origin of the 2011 “Arab Spring” that washed across much of the Middle East, toppling autocrats even in Egypt.

That moment has passed. Autocracy is back in form, increasing its grip on society. Monitoring of all movement has increased, with COVID-19 presenting the ideal reason to step up surveillance, especially via mobile devices in countries such as the United Arab Emirates.

Anti-terrorism laws are widely used as pretext to crush opposition. Saudi Arabia, for example, handed down a 34-year prison sentence to someone who retweeted a statement by a government dissident. This is typical of the atmosphere of oppression in which people in Saudi Arabia live and which makes them very careful about what they say in public. Christians will avoid anything that resembles criticism of the Saudi authorities.

Some of these Christians, especially those who converted from Islam to Christianity, are themselves considered to be potential troublemakers (i.e., **a threat to national stability**) simply because their beliefs have changed. In many countries, they are told by the security services not to engage with other Christians or in Christian activities or face consequences, including detention (in Tunisia and Morocco, for example) and even torture in, for example, Egypt. The worst consequence is capital punishment for apostasy, but this is normally carried out not by state authorities but by families (i.e., “honor killings”), for example in [Iraq](#).¹⁷

Algeria provides an example of particular hostility toward Christianity. During the WWL 2023 reporting period, the country increased its pressure on the church by prosecuting and sentencing Christians and Christian leaders alike. The government ordered several new churches to close, in addition to the churches closed down in previous years. The increased pressure has forced the remaining churches to be very careful, with many decreasing their activities, leading to a growing number of isolated Christians. Algeria is increasingly using laws meant to counter terrorism and money-laundering to target churches and individual Christians.

A look at the Levant region of the Middle East (Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Israel/Palestinian Territories and Jordan) shows the Christian community shrinking due to deprivation, discrimination and persecution. Ever since the Islamic State group (IS) burst onto the scene, Christians in those areas of Iraq and Syria have been struggling to earn a living; young Christians in particular face high unemployment and continual hostility, thus encouraging their **desire to emigrate**. This hostile environment can be felt from birth, when children are sometimes denied legal identities as Christians (particularly if their parents converted from Islam), through to experiencing high levels of discrimination in education and faith-related harassment, such as bullying by teachers or peers.

¹⁷ <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/iraq-christian-convert-killed-by-family/>

In addition, Christians in north-eastern Syria are also facing Turkish attacks on their villages, with dozens of churches, Christian cemeteries, schools and other important buildings severely damaged. This causes many believers to leave the ancient Christian area. Where such emigration increases, church communities are weakened as a consequence, deprived of the next generation of leaders and families, and so become easier targets for further marginalization.

6. The good news: Greater tolerance in the Gulf

In several Gulf states, such as Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates, there has been promotion of greater tolerance; authorities are looking for ways to respond to the call for more religious freedom within a moderate Islamic framework. One manifestation of this can be seen in their endorsement of the [Abraham Accords](#) with Israel.¹⁸

The increasing focus on narratives of “national unity” in, for example, Egypt, and of “tolerance” in Bahrain and UAE does counter radical Islamic currents and helps create an environment that is more friendly toward Christians. Hate speech against Christians belonging to historical or expatriate communities often is not tolerated in a number of countries, including Bahrain, the UAE and Egypt, although radical elements remain present within their societies.

How real, and permanent, are these encouraging signs? One should remember that one reason why these countries have strengthened ties with Israel is their desire to obtain Israeli security technology. If the regimes use it to monitor all levels of society, then Christians and churches will be able to operate only within the limits imposed by the specific state.

¹⁸ <https://www.state.gov/the-abraham-accords/>