



World Watch List 2018 Compilation Volume 3

PERSECUTION DYNAMICS
FOR COUNTRIES RANKING 1-25

January 2018



OpenDoors

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

Open Doors International / World Watch Research Unit

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WWL 2018 Compilation Volume 3: PERSECUTION DYNAMICS FOR COUNTRIES RANKING 1-25

The Country Persecution Dynamics for each country has the following structure:

- Position on World Watch List (WWL)
- Persecution engines
- Drivers of persecution
- Context
- Christian communities and how they are affected
- Pressure in the 5 spheres of life and violence
- Gender profile of persecution
- Future outlook
- Policy considerations

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1. North Korea

Reporting period: 1 November 2016 - 31 October 2017

Position on World Watch List (WWL)

WWL 2018 Points: 94 / Position: 1

WWL 2017 Points: 92 / Position: 1

WWL 2016 Points: 92 / Position: 1

North Korea has been No.1 since WWL 2002 and remains at this position, with an increase of 2 points compared to WWL 2017. But this year it is very closely followed by Afghanistan at No.2. Although the situation for Christians in the two countries is very different, in terms of scoring they are very similar. As in previous years, Christians in North Korea face extreme levels of pressure in all *Spheres of life*, combined with a very high level of violence directed against them. The increase in score for North Korea is partly due to the further increased government paranoia caused by the country's self-imposed isolation from the world, including from its most important neighbor, China.

Persecution engines

Persecution engines in North Korea ¹	
Islamic oppression	Not at all
Religious nationalism	Not at all
Ethnic antagonism	Not at all
Denominational protectionism	Not at all
Communist and post-Communist oppression	Very strong
Secular intolerance	Not at all
Dictatorial paranoia	Very strong
Organized corruption and crime	Not at all

¹ The scale for the level of influence of Persecution engines and Drivers in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong.

Communist and post-Communist oppression (Very strong):

While in theory North Korea still is a Communist country, in practice a personality cult dominates. However, since the country is still run according to Communist administrative customs this is still indicated as the main persecution engine. The outcome of the 7th Congress of the Korea's Workers Party in May 2016 – the first for 36 years – did not change anything visibly, whether concerning economic or ideological issues. Christians not only continue to be seen as dangerous and their religion as “opium for the people” – as in classical Communist ideology – but they are also part of the hostile class, according to the country's social stratification system called *Songbun*.

Dictatorial paranoia (Very strong):

Since 1948, North Korea has been ruled by a single family, now in the third generation. As mentioned above, while originally Communist ideology was followed, this has almost faded away in recent years, although the Communist style of controlling society lives on. North Korea is now a clear example of a country ruled by *Dictatorial paranoia*. Everyone has to revere the leadership and because of this personality cult, Kim Jong Un is an irreplaceable figure in society - not least because he rules the Worker's Party, the army, the country's administration and all strands of society.

Even though his power may not be as absolute as his father's or grandfather's, no one can challenge his authority. The god-like worship of the rulers leaves absolutely no room for any other religion and anyone daring to revere anything or anybody besides the Kim dynasty is seen as dangerous and a threat to the state. The full title of Kim Jong Un sounds impressive: “Dear Respected Comrade Kim Jong Un, Chairman of the Workers' Party of Korea, Chairman of the State Affairs Commission of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and Supreme Commander of the Korean People's Army”. In October 2017, Kim Jong Un [promoted his sister](https://www.nknews.org/pro/the-family-business-why-kim-jong-un-promoted-his-sister/)² to the Party's politburo, allowing her to become part of the country's ruling elite. This emphasizes the North Korean reality where ruling the country and Party is family business.

Drivers of persecution

Drivers of persecution in North Korea	
Government officials at any level from local to national	Very Strong
Ethnic group leaders	Not at all
Non-Christian religious leaders at any level from local to national	Not at all
Christian religious leaders at any level from local to national	Not at all
Violent religious groups	Not at all

² See: <https://www.nknews.org/pro/the-family-business-why-kim-jong-un-promoted-his-sister/>, last accessed 27 November 2017.

Ideological pressure groups	Not at all
Normal citizens (people from the general public), including mobs	Medium
Own (extended) family	Strong
Political parties at any level from local to national	Very strong
Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups	Not at all
Organized crime cartels or networks	Not at all
Multilateral organizations (e.g. UN) and embassies	Not at all

- The main driver of persecution in North Korea is the state, in government and party. For three generations, everything in the country has focused on the reverence of the leading Kim family and this has not ceased with the youngest generation, when Kim Jong Un took over power in December 2011. Christians are seen as hostile elements in society which have to be eradicated in one way or another.
- Even own family members report a Christian to the authorities, as especially children can believe in indoctrination so strongly that they report their own parents, convinced that they are doing something good and right. Therefore, many parents prefer not to tell their children anything about their Christian faith.
- Due to the constant indoctrination permeating the whole country, neighbors are watchful and report suspicious activities to the authorities.

Context

The country's political system is based upon two ideologies. One is called *Juche*, basically saying that the state is self-reliant. The other is *Kimilsungism*, the worship of the leaders, who are the all-powerful entities guiding North Korea. Everyone has to attend weekly meetings where all citizens from every age are ideologically trained and indoctrinated. Attendance of self-criticism sessions is mandatory. No one is allowed to develop deviating ideas, be they religious or other. The system of strict social control results in high self-censorship and self-control on what to say to whom, even in the most private and family relationships. There is a North Korean saying which illustrates the mindset of society well: "Wherever two or three are gathered together, one is a spy."

Hopes that Kim Jong Un would be more open for improvements in economic, social and diplomatic conditions, when he took over power in December 2011, have faltered. The regime seems to be eager to isolate the country yet further, even without the continued missile and nuclear tests, war rhetoric and threats of firing an inter-continental ballistic weapon not just at Guam, but at the American mainland too.

All these tests could be seen as an effort trying to force major powers and neighbors back to the negotiating table. However, so far, the country has only been pushed into further political and economic isolation, reflected in several countries [closing North Korean embassies](#).³ Into the sixth year of his leadership, Kim Jong Un has not visited any foreign state nor has he been visited by a foreign head of state. He even decided to offend close allies and partner states by increasingly annoying his major ally China, which he has not visited until now as well. Kim Jong Un did not mince words in denouncing China's current development, when opening the 7th Party Congress by saying: "Despite the filthy wind of bourgeois liberty and reform and openness blowing in our neighborhood, we let the spirit of Songun [military-first] rifles fly and advanced according to the path of socialism that we had chosen." These are strong words and given that China is basically the only remaining state North Korea can rely on, the chilling attitude towards this last ally seems to indicate that the regime takes pleasure in increasing its isolation. Adding to this observation, in November 2017, Kim Jong Un [decided not to officially receive](#)⁴ a high-ranking Chinese envoy, showing the cooling relations of both countries. But the most visible sign of this has been the very public killing of his half-brother Kim Jong Nam at the airport in Kuala Lumpur in February 2017. International media reporting this assassination failed to highlight the diplomatic fallout which resulted, since North Korea had up until then enjoyed reasonably good relations with Malaysia, which has now suspended all ties for the time being.

Although most North Koreans are not suffering from starvation as they did in the 1990s, the supply of basic needs remains a challenge due to geographical and weather conditions. Hunger is an ever present enemy, day in and day out. Large percentages of the population are undernourished and the percentage of stunted children remains high. The situation is further aggravated by the regime's refusal to cooperate with international organizations and to grant them access to the areas most affected. In July 2017, the UN food agency has warned that due to exceptionally dry weather conditions in April-June, this year's harvest of rice, maize, potatoes and soybean in particular are expected to be very poor. Another indicator for this is the soldier who crossed the DMZ in November 2017 and was seriously wounded. During a medical check, [many parasites](#)⁵ were found in the defector's digestive tract. Given that he was an elite soldier tasked with guarding the inner-Korean border, he should have had a rather better diet than the average citizen. On the other hand, the economic situation has improved slightly since the government granted a certain level of "marketization". This does not, of course, mean anything close to a market economy, but it at least leaves people with more room to maneuver. A [report](#)⁶ published in August 2017 reveals that an estimated 5 million people, roughly 20% of the population either directly or indirectly rely on the market system in North Korea.

³ See: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-northkorea-missiles-diplomacy-factbox/factbox-countries-which-have-expelled-north-korean-ambassadors-after-nuclear-test-idUSKCN1BU0ED>, last accessed 27 November 2017.

⁴ See: http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2017/11/21/2017112101376.html, last accessed 27 November 2017.

⁵ See: https://www.reuters.com/article/us-northkorea-southkorea-defection-soldi/injured-defectors-parasites-and-diet-hint-at-hard-life-in-north-korea-idUSKBN1DH0RL?feedType=RSS&feedName=worldNews&utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+Reuters%2FworldNews+%28Reuters+World+News%29, last accessed 27 November 2017.

⁶ See: <http://www.dailynk.com/english/read.php?num=14676&catald=nk01500>, 22 August 2017, last accessed 28 September 2017.

One should not make too much out of this “marketization” development, however, as was shown at the 7th Party Congress of the Korea Workers’ Party, held in May 2016. Expectations for reforms being announced, especially in the economic sector, were running high among foreign observers, but the outcome was meagre. Given that the Party Congress was the first of its kind since 36 years, the regime chose to focus on re-emphasizing ideology and the dominant role of party and leader and more or less [neglected economic](#)⁷ and other topics. Christians would most likely benefit from an improved economic situation, just as any other citizens. But difficulties in the supply of basic needs probably affect them more since Christians tend to belong to the poorer classes of society. Another particular challenge for them is the ubiquitous use of bribes, which goes against their Christian faith.

One important means of earning hard currency is to send migrant workers to other countries, even to [Europe](#)⁸ [and to extort from them almost everything they are earning](#). If this is how they are dealing with the population’s loyal class, which can be “trusted” enough to be sent abroad, it is hard to imagine what they are doing with the hostile class to which Christians belong. But this practice constitutes an increasing challenge for the regime in times of tightening international sanctions. The [international sanctions](#),⁹ set up in 2017 as a response to the country’s continued nuclear and missile tests, are starting to bite hard and North Korea is struggling to obtain sources of hard currency and is increasingly [looking to Russia for help](#).¹⁰

Defection in general has become more complex due to China reinforcing its stretches of border fencing. Reportedly, China increasingly [arrests and repatriates](#)¹¹ North Korean refugees and this continuing practice could also endanger Christians. The prices which [brokers](#)¹² charge to North Koreans seeking to enter China illegally have “skyrocketed” in the last months. Whereas the price at the end of 2016 averaged \$8,900 per defector, charges have been as high as \$16,000 in 2017. Finally, times of increased tension with South Korea are always times of heightened propaganda and stronger ideological checks. These leave Christians under higher pressure.

As the regime in North Korea is Communist, all religions are seen as “superstitious” and therefore fought against. However, Asian religions (like Buddhism) have a little more room for maneuver. They are not seen as something Western and practicing them can be done secretly with less danger.

⁷ See: <http://www.rfa.org/english/commentaries/parallel-thoughts/korea-lankov-05172016171754.html>, last accessed 2 December 2016.

⁸ See: <https://news.vice.com/article/cash-for-kim-how-north-koreans-are-working-themselves-to-death-in-europe>, last accessed 2 December 2016.

⁹ See: <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/korea/workers-08242017140117.html>, last accessed 27 November 2017.

¹⁰ See: https://www.reuters.com/article/us-northkorea-missiles-russia-analysis/russia-throws-north-korea-lifeline-to-stymie-regime-change-idUSKBN1C91X2?feedType=RSS&feedName=worldNews&utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium, last accessed 27 November 2017.

¹¹ See: <http://www.dailynk.com/english/read.php?cataId=nk01500&num=14671>, last accessed 28 September 2017.

¹² See: <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/korea/defectors-05182017161546.html>, last accessed 28 September 2017.

Christian communities and how they are affected

There are neither communities of expatriate Christians, nor non-traditional Christian communities in North Korea; all Christians belong to one of the two following groups and are experiencing the strongest persecution imaginable:

Historical Christian communities:

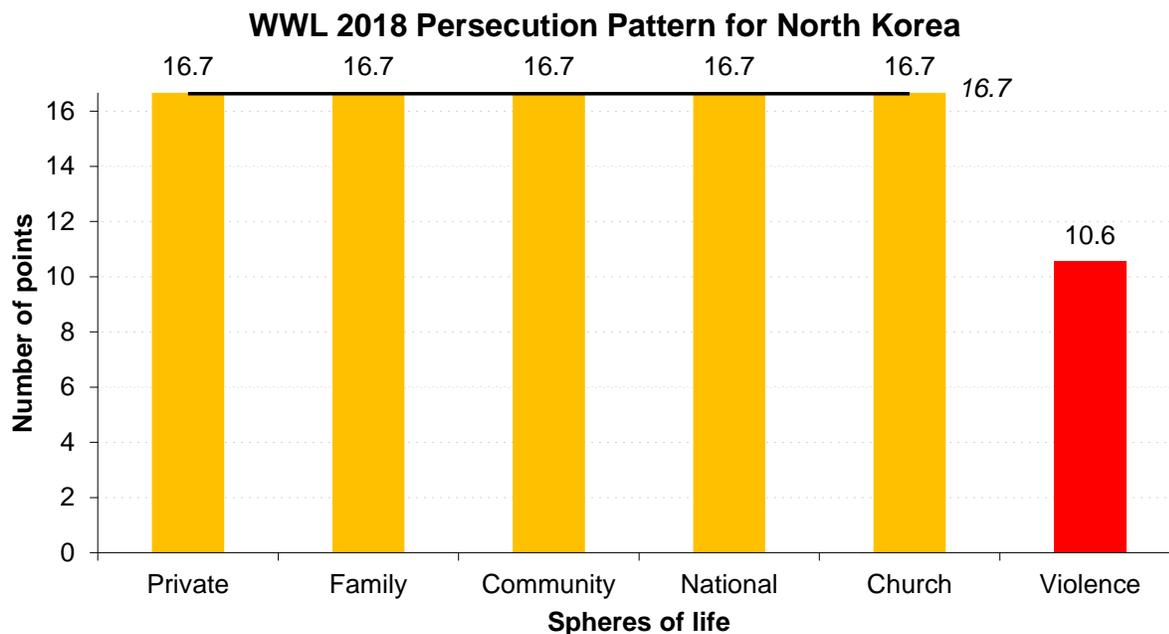
They originate from the time before the Korean War (1950 -1953). While many Christians either died in the war or fled to the South, others stayed and they and their descendants make up these communities. Every citizen is classified into a social system called *Songbun*. Christians are classified under the “hostile” classes and even have two subclasses of their own, namely class 37 for Protestant Christians and 39 for Catholic Christians. These classes generally apply to those Christians whose parents or grandparents were known to be Christians. For the largest part they were banished to isolated villages as a punishment for having the wrong *Songbun*. Only a small percentage of the historical Christian communities were able to hide their faith and form an underground church. Due to the guilt-by-association principle, the descendants of those Christians face insurmountable social and other obstacles and are watched with suspicion.

Communities of converts to Christianity:

These converts all come from a Communist or a Kim Il Sung/Kim Jong Il-background. Many of them are North Koreans who came to the Christian faith during the 1990s¹³ when countless people crossed the border to China during the years of famine and found help in Chinese churches. After returning to North Korea, they remained true to their new-found faith.

¹³ Many also crossed the border after the year 2000, but not in such large numbers.

Pressure in the 5 spheres of life and violence



(The maximum score for each block is 16.7)

The Persecution pattern shows:

- Overall, the pressure on Christians in North Korea increased over almost all *Spheres of life*, causing the average pressure to be at an extreme level. It rose from a score of 16.4 in WWL 2017 to the maximum possible score of 16.7.
- All *Spheres of life* experience extreme pressure levels with maximum scores. This pattern reflects the reality of a state where *Dictatorial paranoia* is evident in every part of society. There is probably no other country on earth where the term paranoia fits better; it affects everything in North Korea.
- The violence score increased from 9.8 in WWL 2017 to 10.6 in WWL 2018, since not just homes of Christians have been raided, but also (road side) shops and businesses as well.

Private sphere:

Given the situation outlined above, it is no wonder that North Korea scores maximum points in the *private sphere*. It is highly dangerous to read the Bible or to express Christian faith in any way whatsoever. Bibles and other materials are carefully hidden and only used when the believers are sure they are really alone. Christians tend to divide Christian materials up (or destroy them) after memorizing the content in order to avoid storing whole copies. Meeting with other Christians is highly dangerous, talking about one's faith to non-Christian family members (let alone to others) is virtually impossible. Family members are taught that their prime loyalty is to the Kim family. Since even children are willing to denounce their parents because of this high pressure to be loyal to the Kims and they are taught so (as reports continue to show), most parents do not even dare to tell their own children that they are Christians.

Family sphere:

The extreme-level score is reflected in one commentator's statement: "Children are taught the name of Kim Il Sung before they are taught their parents' names." If Christians are discovered, they will lose everything. They will not only be interrogated to find out about their networks, their families will also be arrested due to the guilt-by-association principle and all will face years of misery in labor camps. Families are deliberately broken up if someone's faith is discovered. If both husband and wife are Christians, they may be sent to different labor camps. In any case, men and women are very often separated, although some camps do have family barracks. Anyone discovered engaging in clandestine religious activities will be subjected to discrimination, arrest, arbitrary detention, disappearance, torture, and/or public execution. Because of the high risks, it is impossible for Christian parents to teach their children according to their faith, for not only would it be dangerous, they would also have to work against the weekly indoctrination sessions, which even start in the nurseries. Celebrating Christian weddings, funerals or Communion service openly is out of the question, as is, of course, any public Christian baptism.

Community sphere:

Everyone is under strict social control as North Korea applies the old Communist method of neighborhood watch, called *inminban*. Everything that happens within a housing unit will be reported to the authorities by trained neighbors, so that virtually no activity, no visit, basically no deviation will pass unnoted. Children of Christians are usually not aware of their parents' faith, for most parents prefer to share their faith only when the children are older, if at all. But if they know about it, they have to be very careful not to reveal their faith for this will lead to immediate denunciation, not only of themselves, but of their whole family. Similar caution is necessary in the workplace and at home, especially in all self-criticism sessions, which have stepped up according to reports obtained, reflecting an increasing pressure from the state and reliance on ideology.

National sphere:

Everything is aligned with the ideologies of *Juche* and *Kimilsungism/KimJongllism* (as explained above). Media reporting against Christians is biased - if there are any reports at all - as state media refer to Christian missionaries as terrorists and regard Christianity as a threat to the state. Christians can never expect a fair trial when they have to appear in court. Even expatriate Christians will not get a fair trial when arrested by authorities. Consequently, the *national sphere* scores maximum points. North Korean police officials will hunt down and vigorously prosecute North Koreans who convert to Protestant Christianity while in China or those who attempt to bring Christian literature, primarily Bible verses, back with them to North Korea. Every defector caught and repatriated will have to answer a lot of questions. All reports confirm that these include questions like: "Did you meet any Christians in China?" and "Have you visited a church in China?" North Korean agents have been active on Chinese territory but there were a number of high-level defections in 2016. This is especially significant since these sort of defections increase state paranoia and make life for Christians and others in North Korea even more complicated and controlled. It already caused the regime to tighten its border security even further.

Church sphere:

Churches simply cannot exist. There are four government-controlled church buildings in Pyongyang which are used by the regime to show its international visitors that it grants freedom of religion. One of them is Roman Catholic, two are Protestant and one is Russian Orthodox. Those churches are not able to function as church congregations in the true sense of the word as they do not have any space to move beyond the limits set by the government. Outside of these “show-churches”, it is not possible to produce or import Christian materials legally or to set up any Christian organization. Legal training of leaders or youth work cannot be done at all.

Violence:

Persecution in North Korea remains violent. There have been raids against Christians and killings, but for security reasons no details can be published and it is difficult to obtain reports from the labor camps. Canadian-Korean pastor Hyeon Soo Lim was released from prison on 9 August 2017, after allegedly having confessed his guilt. Pastor Dong-cheol Kim, however, is still detained in North Korea. Two Korean-American Christians and lecturers at the Pyongyang University of Science and Technology (PUST), Tony Kim and Hak-song Kim, were also arrested in April and May 2017 respectively. North Korea accused them of behavior opposing the regime. In a [change of its hiring policy](#),¹⁴ PUST is reportedly now having to look for non-American staff.

Gender profile of persecution

No data available.

Future outlook

Persecution resulting from the engines of *Communist and Post-Communist oppression* blended with *Dictatorial paranoia* is fanned by a growing ideology of self-reliance and increasing isolation, as reflected in the continued series of rocket and nuclear weapon tests, as well as in the country’s behavior towards its traditional ally China and the killing of Kim Jong Nam at a Malaysian airport.

The country’s biggest challenge remains its relationship with China. It still depends heavily on China economically and cannot afford to be abandoned by it. China is increasingly unhappy with the regime’s behavior but still has reasons to keep North Korea afloat. Those reasons are: i) the unpredictability of any scenario if the Kim regime did collapse: ii) the question whether North Korea’s nuclear weapons could be a potential danger for China itself and regional stability, and iii) the fact that, after any form of reunification, it is likely that US troops would be stationed directly at China’s border.

¹⁴ See: <https://www.nknews.org/2017/10/pyongyang-university-no-longer-seeking-american-volunteers/?c=1508909752924>, last accessed 27 November 2017.

Kim Jong Un has still not traveled to any foreign country, despite having ruled the country for more than six years now. According to tradition and as a matter of courtesy, he should visit China first. If he does, this would point to a warming relationship, which would be bad news for Christians, since China continues to repatriate every North Korean who manages to defect, despite having signed the United Nation’s Refugee Convention and despite the fact that China could send all defectors to South Korea without any cost and effort.

There are many signs indicating an even more severe persecution of Christians in North Korea in the future:

- The increased detention and abduction of (South Korean and Chinese Korean) Christians and missionaries in China.
- The strengthened border control and harsher punishment of North Korean citizens who are repatriated from China.
- The increased number of Korean missionaries being expelled by [China](#).¹⁵
- The increased activities of the North Korean government attempting to eliminate any possibility of spreading the Christian message.

Policy considerations

- Reports show that large numbers of Christians are held in labor camps. The international community should strongly denounce the existence of these labor camps and put pressure on the North Korean government to close them and to restore justice to the victims.
- Sanctions and international isolation have not stopped underground exports from North Korea to China and have resulted in greater tension with North Korea and a worsening situation for the population, including Christians. In the current context, China is wary of implementing sanctions, and the government is reducing space for negotiation in all areas, including religious freedom. Therefore, the international community should ensure cooperation and a common effort to engage in direct negotiation with the North Korean government and refrain from military pre-emptive approaches.
- The international community should work with countries allied to North Korea to put pressure on the government to release any imprisoned Christian foreigners.
- The Seoul UN field base and the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea should request permission to carry out prison visits with a view to including the situation of Christian prisoners, in line with international law requirements to hold routine prison monitoring.
- The Seoul UN field base and the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea might use their position to examine the persecution of

¹⁵ See: <http://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2017/march/china-kicks-out-korean-missionaries-south-north-thaad-jilin.html>, last accessed 28 September 2017.

Christians in North Korea to provide fuller reporting on the situation, to call on the regime to allow access to Christians held in forced labor camps and prisons and to call for their eventual release.

- China should stop the forced repatriation of North Korean refugees and uphold their full human rights, including access to housing, education and religious freedom.
- The international community should examine the human rights situation of North Korean refugees and fully investigate claims of human trafficking and slavery.

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2. Afghanistan

Reporting period: 1 November 2016 - 31 October 2017

Position on World Watch List (WWL)

WWL 2018 Points: 93 / Position: 2

WWL 2017 Points: 89 / Position: 3

WWL 2016 Points: 88 / Position: 4

In the WWL 2018 reporting period Afghanistan has seen an increase in scores for pressure, bringing the country very close to North Korea's No.1 position. Although the situation for Christians in the two countries is very different, in terms of scoring they only differ through a slightly lower score for violence in Afghanistan. Both reach the maximum score in all *Spheres of life*, combined with a very high level of violence directed against Christians. The overall increase in score has two main reasons: One is the stronger emphasis on tribal allegiance and loyalty with tribal justice, already foreshadowing the upcoming parliamentary elections due in Summer 2018; the second reason is an increase in insurgency – not only has the Islamic State group joined the Taliban as a violent Islamic player in Afghanistan, they also control an increasing amount of the country's territory.

Persecution engines

Persecution engines ¹⁶	
Islamic oppression	Very strong

¹⁶ The scale for the level of influence of Persecution engines and Drivers in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong.

Religious nationalism	Not at all
Ethnic antagonism	Very strong
Denominational protectionism	Not at all
Communist and post-Communist oppression	Not at all
Secular intolerance	Not at all
Dictatorial paranoia	Not at all
Organized corruption and crime	Very strong

Islamic oppression:

The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan neither allows any Afghan citizens to become Christians nor recognizes converts as such. Conversion is seen as apostasy and brings shame on the family and the Islamic community. Therefore, converts hide their new-won faith as far as possible. The Taliban increased their control over parts of the country - according to a recent report from September 2017, the Taliban control or are fighting to control a record [45% of Afghanistan's territory](#).¹⁷ Thus they have a growing influence as shown by the high number of attacks and battles with government forces struggling for supremacy in various provinces. The new leadership of the Taliban, which is even more inclined to extremist religious views, has enhanced its campaigns for controlling areas. Also, the influx of groups related to the Islamic State group (ISKP or Islamic State in the Khorasan Province) has translated into an even higher number of people killed in attacks or displaced according to UN figures ([8,019 civilian casualties in first nine months of 2017 - 2,640 people killed and 5,379 injured](#))¹⁸, while an estimated 600,000 refugees have been sent back from neighboring Pakistan, putting the country under [enormous pressure](#)¹⁹.

Christians with an Afghan nationality are all converts with a Muslim background. If they are discovered, they face discrimination and hostility (including death) at the hands of their family, friends and community. Muslim religious leaders will most likely be the instigators and local authorities can be involved, too. According to a survey published in November 2017, the Afghan people display the [highest levels of confidence](#)²⁰ in their religious leaders and in the media - far ahead of their trust in any politicians. More than 60% of respondents would welcome religious leaders being more involved in politics. In the southwestern and eastern parts of the country, this percentage was as high as 75%. Converts are put under heavy pressure to give up their Christian faith. Those who decide to leave Islam are considered apostates and find themselves in an extremely dangerous situation.

¹⁷ See: <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/09/lwj-map-assessment-taliban-controls-or-contests-45-of-afghan-districts.php>, last accessed 6 December 2017.

¹⁸ See: <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/unama-documents-slight-decrease-in-civilian-casualties-indications-of-new-trends-in-the-afghan-war/>, 12 October 2017, last accessed 25 August 2017.

¹⁹ See: <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/resettling-nearly-half-a-million-afghans-in-nangrahar-the-consequences-of-the-mass-return-of-refugees/>, 12 May 2017, last accessed 25 August 2017.

²⁰ See: <https://asiafoundation.org/publication/afghanistan-2017-survey-afghan-people/>, last accessed 27 November 2017.

Ethnic antagonism:

The concept of nation is alien to the Afghan way of thinking. One’s own family comes first, followed by the clan and then the tribe – and all of these are much more important than the country. People are deeply entrenched in caring for their families, villages and tribes. If someone dares to turn from his tribe to embrace something new and maybe even foreign, this results in high pressure to make that person return to traditional norms. If this does not happen, such a person will be looked upon as a traitor of the community and hence excluded. This applies to all “deviations” but even more if someone turns to Christianity. The Christian religion is considered to be Western and hostile to Afghan culture, society and Islam. In this respect, conversion away from Islam is seen as treason.

Organized corruption and crime:

The lack of exportable goods has led to a huge trade imbalance, causing the country to be in constant financial need. A stunning 80% of the GDP comes from the informal sector and so corruption and crime are omnipresent. This also affects Christians because they belong to the poor majority of society. One of the main economic problems Afghanistan faces is that growing illicit drugs like opium is much more lucrative than virtually any other crop. Compared to wheat, farmers can earn eleven times the amount of money with poppy production. Consequently, the opium trade makes up approximately 7% of the equivalent of the country’s licit GDP, according to a UN report. The Taliban are heavily involved in drug production; estimations are that 70-80% of all drug trafficking profit is channeled into funding Taliban activities.

Afghanistan’s main opium production hub, the southern province of Helmand, is home to around 50% of the country’s area suitable for poppy cultivation and a stronghold of the Taliban. In November 2017 the UN Office for Drugs and Crime (UNODC) highlighted the fact that the country’s [opium production](#)²¹ had grown to unprecedented heights, increasing by 87% in 2017. The total area under poppy cultivation is reported to have increased by almost half. The income from this is known to fund armed militant groups and fuel corruption. Everyone who is in the way of the drug lords will simply be pushed aside, a practice which has intensified. The situation is made additionally volatile by drug barons putting citizens in many areas under pressure and making parts of the country uncontrollable. In most cases, this does not happen to Christians alone, as they are not visible anyway, but they are also affected as they do not have an alternative or someone to turn to in order to seek help.

Drivers of persecution

Drivers of persecution in AFGHANISTAN	
Government officials at any level from local to national	Very Strong

²¹ See: <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/a-low-risk-crop-in-a-high-risk-environment-annual-opium-survey-shows-afghan-poppy-cultivation-at-a-record-high/>, last accessed 27 November 2017.

Ethnic group leaders	Very Strong
Non-Christian religious leaders at any level from local to national	Very Strong
Christian religious leaders at any level from local to national	Not at all
Violent religious groups	Very Strong
Ideological pressure groups	Not at all
Normal citizens (people from the general public), including mobs	Very Strong
Own (extended) family	Very Strong
Political parties at any level from local to national	Very Strong
Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups	Not at all
Organized crime cartels or networks	Strong
Multilateral organizations (e.g. UN) and embassies	Not at all

As Afghanistan is per constitution an Islamic state, all other religions are seen as alien to the country and consequently government parties and officials are hostile towards all signs of Christianity. This is even truer for ethnic group leaders, Islamic leaders and citizens. The tribal community in Afghanistan is stronger and more important than the state. Everyone leaving this community, for example by changing his or her religion to Christianity, is seen as leaving this community and in need of being brought back. For most families a conversion brings shame, and the family will do much - in some cases everything necessary - to bring the convert back to Islam or to atone for the shame. The same is true for the community (neighbors and friends). The continuing Taliban insurgency, recently joined by the rival Islamic State group,²² puts an additional pressure on the already hidden group of Christians. If discovered, they face almost certain death.

Context

Afghanistan has been a volatile region for centuries. It was ruled by Persians and gained independence as a state in 1709. The north-western part of the country is also known as “Khorasan”, a term which gained prominence when militants pledged allegiance to the Islamic State group (IS), announcing the introduction of a “caliphate of Khorasan”.²³ These militants are fighting Afghan government troops in the north-eastern part of the country and continue attacking Muslim minorities such as the Shia Hazara. Whereas this is a

²² Some Taliban units have switched allegiance to the Islamic State group.

²³ Ancient Khorasan included parts of Iran and Pakistan as well.

dangerous development, it has to be asked whether IS really is the [most dangerous threat](#)²⁴ to peace in the country. The Taliban has also made it clear that their power to devastate and destroy is unchecked. In April 2017, the Taliban launched its [largest attack since 2001](#)²⁵, killing 140 government soldiers in Balkh Province.

The Western concept of a nation state is alien to Afghanistan; loyalty belongs to the tribe, the language, the ethnicity, but not to a state. Every decision in the country therefore has to be seen through these multiple lenses. Having authority in Kabul does not mean having authority in the provinces. This is at least partly an explanation for the country's complicated politics. There is a very real [threat that the National Unity Government could break apart](#)²⁶, even before general elections can take place in 2018. [Internal power struggles](#)²⁷ within the government have been developing for some time and came to the fore in July 2017, when Vice-President Dostum (an ethnic Uzbek) was barred from returning to Afghanistan after receiving “medical treatment” in Turkey. While abroad, he announced the founding of a new political party.

With [over a hundred people killed](#)²⁸ in suicide attacks at the end of May and beginning of June 2017, it does not come as a surprise that bringing peace to the country's war-weary civilian population is an uphill battle in the truest sense of the word. Killing the militant leaders, be they Taliban or IS, does not seem to be a promising strategy. The same can be said of the setting up and equipping of [more militias](#)²⁹, as the proposal for a new “Afghan Territorial Army” suggested in September 2017. There is a plethora of different radical Islamic groups active in Afghanistan, be they Islamic State Khorasan Province, Taliban, or smaller groups such as the Haqqani network. Although each have their own agenda, they are united in their efforts to harm and – if possible – topple the government. The death of the third IS-leader in Afghanistan to be killed within one year (in July 2017) will not add calm to the volatile security situation. The country has witnessed an increasing number of attacks in October 2017 and a growing trend of [attacks against Shiite places of worship](#).³⁰ Thus Sunni militants are clearly trying to exploit existing sectarian rifts.

Another ongoing challenge is the financing of all the radical Islamist groups. Global Witness published a report in June 2016, describing how [precious minerals](#)³¹ provide financial backing for some of those groups

²⁴ See: <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/mother-of-all-bombs-dropped-on-iskp-assessing-the-aftermath/>, 15 April 2017, last accessed 24 August 2017.

²⁵ See: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-taliban-analysis-idUSKBN17P0RJ?feedType=RSS&feedName=worldNews>, 23 April 2017, last accessed 24 August 2017.

²⁶ See: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/285-afghanistan-future-national-unity-government>, 10 April 2017, last accessed 24 August 2017.

²⁷ See: <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/the-ankara-coalition-opposition-from-within-the-government/>, 25 July 2017, last accessed 24 August 2017.

²⁸ See: <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/a-black-week-in-kabul-terror-and-protests/>, 4 June 2017, last accessed 24 August 2017.

²⁹ See: <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/more-militias-part-2-the-proposed-afghan-territorial-army-in-the-fight-against-iskp/>, 23 September 2017, last accessed 27 September 2017.

³⁰ See: https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/unama_report_on_attacks_against_places_of_worship_7nov2017_0.pdf, last accessed 27 November 2017.

³¹ See: <https://www.globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/afghanistan/war-treasury-people-afghanistan-lapis-lazuli-and-battle-mineral-wealth/>, last accessed 29 November 2016.

in northern Afghanistan. Another important source of income are drugs like opium, especially for the Taliban. This is why they took every effort to gain as much influence over the southern province Helmand as possible, a region which is known as the cradle of the drug trade. The gains are not exclusively taken by the Taliban, however; government officials take their share as well.

As mentioned above, Shiites are targeted by Sunni radical groups in an effort to increase and deepen already existing sectarian rifts, but the Muslim Sufi minority is victim to persecution as well.

Christian communities and how they are affected

Communities of expatriate Christians:

These are not included as a separate WWL category as they are so few, so protected and so isolated that they are hardly impacted by the country's situation.

Historical Christian communities:

These do not exist in Afghanistan.

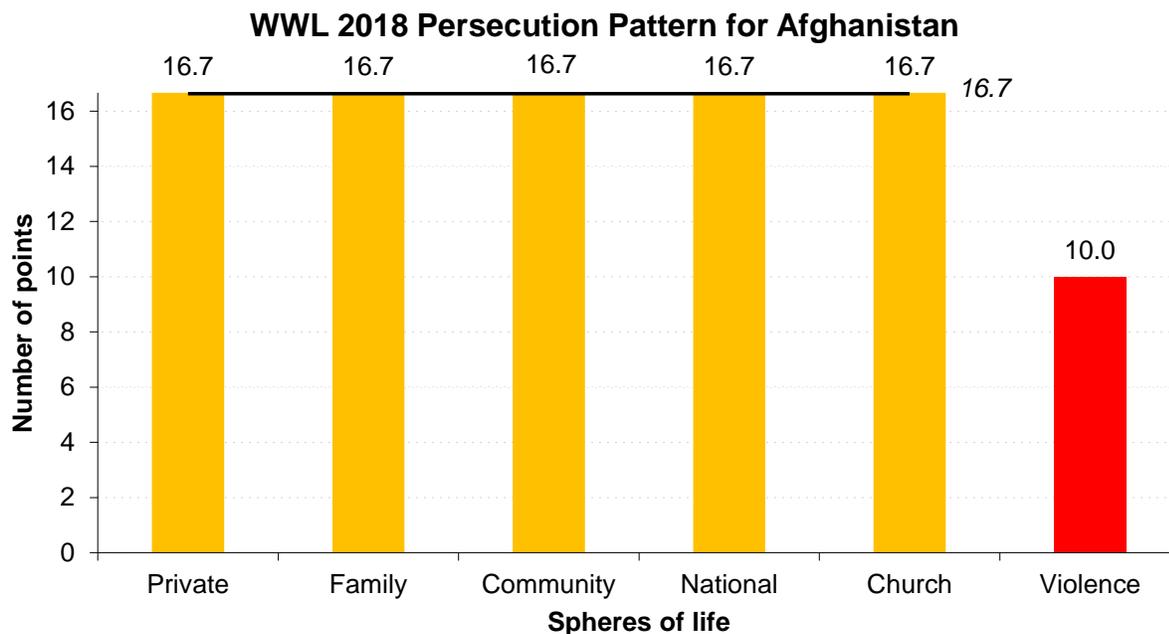
Communities of converts to Christianity:

Christians from a Muslim background try their utmost not to be discovered by family, friends, neighbors or the wider community. Depending on the family, they may even have to fear for their lives. For them, living openly as a Christian is simply not possible - even the suspicion of being a Christian can bring severe persecution.

Non-traditional Christian communities:

These do not exist in Afghanistan

Pressure in the 5 spheres of life and violence



(The maximum score for each block is 16.7)

The Persecution pattern shows:

- Overall, the pressure on Christians in Afghanistan increased over all *spheres of life*, causing the average pressure to rise from a score of 15.7 in WWL 2017 to the maximum score of 16.7. The country continues to fall apart with radical Islamic militants competing for power and the National Unity Government remaining fragmented.
- All *Spheres of life* show extreme levels of pressure with maximum scores. While pressure in the *Family, Private* and *Community spheres* is typical for strictly Islamic countries, the pressure in the *National* and *Church spheres* points to a government relying on strictly interpreted Islamic rules and a basically tribal society (despite all promises to international bodies about making attempts to live up to human rights standards).
- The violence score decreased from 10.2 in WWL 2017 to 10 points. However, this does not necessarily mean that violence against Christians lessened; it shows rather that, due to the insurgency, it is harder to get reports on specific incidents (see details below under “Violence”).

Private sphere:

The government’s position (as well as that of the average Afghan in the street) is that Afghans cannot be Christian and that it is illegal to have any other faith than Islam. Therefore, converts always have to be very cautious as even the suspicion of having converted can lead to severe consequences like arrest and the destruction of homes. Families often hide their faith from their own children. As they can never know which members of their clan have been recruited by IS or Taliban, they are intensely cautious about whom they trust in regard to their faith. Social control is high and it is difficult to hide the new-won faith over a

long period of time, especially if the convert has children. Additionally, converts are in a catch-22 situation as they do not want to send their children to a *madrassa* but cannot share about the new faith to their children either, because that is too dangerous. Meeting with other Christians demands acting with the utmost caution as well.

Family sphere:

Islam is the only religion under which anybody can be registered, so everyone is registered as Muslim. Anything else is unacceptable and unthinkable. Registering a conversion is impossible. Baptisms are considered as a crime punishable by death and therefore have to be done in secret. As most Christians will keep their conversion secret, they will be buried according to Islamic rites. If Afghans are discovered to have become Christians, their children will automatically be taken away and given to adoption by Muslim families. Those children will be harassed in their new family and at school. If a family succeeds in keeping their conversion secret, the children will have no option but to continue to attend *madrassa* teaching and are likely to grow up confused if they know about the faith of their parents. If a convert is discovered, the spouse is likely to be pressured into divorce and the convert will face the loss of custody of children and the loss of inheritance rights. Converts are sometimes sent to a mental hospital, since families believe that no sane person would ever leave Islam.

Community sphere:

Any convert discovered will lose access to community resources and healthcare. The pressure to attend mosques is high on everyone and a convert cannot opt out without raising suspicion. Communities exercise immense pressure to ensure allegiance and order and consequently watch and observe everyone. Whoever is seen as deviating is compelled to return to the mainstream religious and political views, be it by physical torture or by using occult practices (since many Afghans are superstitious). Christian parents also fear sending their children to school because they want to protect them from false indoctrination and from revealing their hidden Christian identity. This causes all sorts of complications. If Christian converts are discovered, they will certainly be taken away for investigation and interrogation. These interrogations are intense, regardless of whether they are carried out by government authorities, the Taliban or IS.

National sphere:

Article 3 of the constitution, stating that no law shall contravene the tenets and provisions of Islam, leads to restrictions in many areas. And as the wording is flexible, it remains unclear what may be deemed as inappropriate and against Islam. Afghanistan is an Islamic Republic and does not allow any deviation from the Muslim faith. Accusations of conversion are equated with blasphemy and neither Christians (nor other religious minorities – including Muslim ones) enjoy freedom of religion. Everyone has to comply with Islamic, tribal and cultural demands. If Christian converts have to stand trial, it is officially not because of their faith, but because of other serious crimes (e.g. for treason by working with foreign intelligence agencies, murder or drug dealing).

Church sphere:

There is no publicly accessible church in Afghanistan. The only functioning chapel is placed in the basement of the Italian embassy in Kabul and only open for the small number of expatriates (mainly diplomatic and

military staff) still working in the city. Any form of organized meeting noted by the Taliban or monitoring agencies receives high attention. Pockets of believers (no matter how small they are) have to be cautious about how they meet. Often they are watched and followed undetected until they meet with a bigger group or engage in some activity like Bible distribution. Then they are pulled in for interrogation. Christian materials cannot, of course, be imported legally and the internet is closely monitored. The internet is anyway not accessible in the more remote areas of the country.

Violence:

The [killing](#)³² of a German and the abduction of a Finnish citizen in May 2017 (both women working for the Swedish aid agency Operation Mercy in Kabul), shows the danger Christians in the country are facing. It is unclear whether the victims were attacked because they were seen as being Christian missionaries. The Afghan guard at the guest house was beheaded. The Finnish aid worker was released on 14 September 2017. There were reports of Afghan Christians being killed for their faith and of Afghans being killed just on suspicion of being Christian. No details can be made available for security reasons.

Gender profile of persecution

No data available.

Future outlook

Afghanistan is facing a volatile and highly violent future, especially as elections are due in 2018 and 2019. The small Christian community also faces this difficult future. *Islamic oppression* by home-grown and foreign groups will doubtless remain the main engine of persecution of Christians in Afghanistan, next to family and society, of course. Observers see little hope for a negotiated peace with the Taliban, other insurgents and regional warlords. Basically, this is due to four reasons:

- 1) Political reasons: The National Unity Government is increasingly breaking apart and it is hard to see how elections for parliament (planned for June 2018) and the presidential elections (due in 2019) can bring any solutions to the multitude of problems the country is facing, given the political stand-off between different factions and ethnic groups. The announcement of a [new opposition group](#)³³ “Mehwar-e Mardom-e Afghanistan”, said to have close ties with former President Hamid Karzai (who has become a fierce critic of the international military presence in Afghanistan), may add to the political turmoil.

³² See: <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/05/21/world/kabul-afghanistan-aid-worker-attack-abduction/index.html>, last accessed 6 December 2017.

³³ See: <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/mehwar-e-mardom-e-afghanistan-new-opposition-group-with-an-ambiguous-link-to-karzai/>, last accessed 27 November 2017.

- 2) Economic reasons: Although Afghanistan’s state revenue saw a [strong growth](#)³⁴, it is still far from covering the total budget, meaning that the government will continue to fail to provide for the people’s most basic needs.
- 3) Military reasons: Insurgents have increased attacks and have control of an increasing number of districts all over the country. This is true even though the US and international forces decided to increase their number of troops in August 2017. It seems most likely that Afghanistan is going to see continued attacks and bloodshed. The fact that the International Committee of the Red Cross is [withdrawing completely from two northern provinces](#)³⁵ of the country and is reducing its presence in others (as announced in October 2017), is a clear and very worrying sign in this respect.
- 4) Geostrategic reasons: For the time being it is Pakistan and maybe Iran holding the keys to an overall solution in Afghanistan. This was highlighted once again, when Pakistan threatened to send the estimated three million [Afghan refugees](#)³⁶ currently living in Pakistan back home. The 600,000 refugees they did send back in 2016 and who mostly settled in the province of Nangrahar, overwhelmed Afghanistan’s options already. Furthermore, *Organized corruption and crime* is flourishing with the increasing opium production funding terrorist groups, which translates into further violence (against Christians too).

There seems no way out from the circle of violence, insecurity and poverty in the country. It is completely unclear – humanly speaking – where hope for an improved situation can come from. This is especially true for the small Christian minority in the country: Persecution is not going to decrease in the short term.

Policy considerations

- The EU, as the biggest financial contributor to Afghanistan’s National Action Plan for Women, should establish indicators for religious freedom, then monitor and report on progress across all religious groups and minorities. The EU and UNSCR should hold the government of Afghanistan accountable to setting timelines, benchmarks and institutions responsible for implementation of the National Action Plan on UNSCR 1325.2.
- While Open Doors welcomes the ambitious reform agenda of the Afghan government, the government should ensure that all religious groups are treated as full citizens before the law, and are

³⁴ See: <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/afghan-government-revenue-continues-to-grow-a-bright-spot-in-a-weak-economy/>, 27 September 2017, last accessed 27 September 2017.

³⁵ See: <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/working-in-a-grey-zone-icrc-forced-to-scale-back-its-work-in-afghanistan/>, last accessed 27 November 2017.

³⁶ See: http://www.irinnews.org/news/2016/06/23/pakistan-going-send-afghan-refugees-home?utm_source=IRIN+-+the+inside+story+on+emergencies&utm_campaign=aa24b5ba2d-RSS_EMAIL_ENGLISH_ALL&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_d842d98289-aa24b5ba2d-15684673, last accessed 29 November 2016.

thus included in the vision to enable citizens to exert their constitutional rights with confidence. (The reform agenda is presented in the Afghanistan National Peace and Development Framework [ANPDF].)

- While Open Doors welcomes the opening up to civil society participation in the development of policy and accountability structures, the government and international community should make a firm commitment to guarantee the participation of religious leaders and faith-based organizations.
- While Open Doors welcomes the commitment to inclusive development, poverty alleviation and economic growth, and call for the EU and international community donors of significant funding for Afghanistan to monitor and review progress against international Freedom of Religion or Belief standards. Commitments made under the ANPDF should be applied equally to people of all religious beliefs, discrimination on the grounds of religious belief or conversion should be penalized.
- The government of Afghanistan and the international community should mainstream equality for all religious groups into the strong and positive commitment to women’s participation and empowerment, and full access to quality education for all. (ANPDF 5.6)
- As the EU Council seeks to stem migration and aid Afghanistan in refugee efforts, a firm commitment is needed to human rights obligations to guarantee asylum for those fleeing religious persecution.
- The EU and international donors supporting Afghanistan in the ANPDF and Self-Reliance Mutual Accountability Framework (SMAF) should make their financial and political contributions conditional to the respect and protection of Freedom of Religion or Belief.
- The Afghan government should implement the significant human rights commitments made under SMAF and enshrine people of all religions as equal under law.
- The Afghan government should deliver on citizen-based monitoring of development and governance benchmarks, with full participation of Christians and all religious groups.
- The Afghan government should implement the Elimination of Violence Against Women (EVAW) indiscriminately of religious belief, with particular attention to religiously motivated abuses.
- The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) should hold the Afghanistan government accountable to Article 57 of the Special Report on the 23 July 2016 attacks calling for increased efforts to protect all ethnic and religious communities and to bring legal action against any advocacy of religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence.

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3. Somalia

Reporting period: 1 November 2016 - 31 October 2017

Position on World Watch List (WWL)

WWL 2018 Points: 91 / Position: 3

WWL 2017 Points: 91 / Position: 2

WWL 2016 Points: 87 / Position: 7

With a score of 91 points, Somalia ranks 3 on WWL 2018. Mired in ceaseless civil war, social fragmentation, tribalism and Islamic radicalism, Somalia is once again high in the WWL top ten. The pressure on Christians has remained at an extreme level and violence has been very high. Al-Shabaab showed its potency by conducting a number of attacks in the capital city of the country.

Persecution engines

Persecution engines ³⁷	
Islamic oppression	Very strong
Religious nationalism	Not at all
Ethnic antagonism	Very strong
Denominational protectionism	Not at all
Communist and post-Communist oppression	Not at all
Secular intolerance	Not at all
Dictatorial paranoia	Very Weak
Organized corruption and crime	Very strong

Islamic oppression (Very strong):

Somalia is a majority Muslim nation and society expects all Somalis to be Muslim. Imams in mosques and madrassas (as well as the leaders of al-Shabaab) state publicly that there is no room for Christianity, Christians and churches in Somalia. The country's Constitution declares that Islam is the state religion. The government prohibits Christians from celebrating Christmas and those who want to celebrate must do it in a very discreet way. The violent non-state actor, al-Shabaab, a militant Islamic group that subscribes to the doctrine of Wahhabism and advocates Sharia law as the basis for regulating all aspects of life in Somalia, target and kill Somalis who are suspected of being converts to Christianity. Foreign jihadists are also present in the country. But Islamic oppression is not limited to militants only. Christians also face

³⁷ The scale for the level of influence of Persecution engines and Drivers in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong.

serious persecution from family, extended family members and the community at large. To be Christian, especially a convert from Islam, is a huge challenge and can lead to brutal death at the hands of radical groups.

Ethnic antagonism (Very strong):

The clan is a major factor in Somali society and orders the way daily life is run and how one community is related to another. This clan structure has also a profound impact on how the federal government is structured and how elections are conducted, as was evident in the 2017 Somali election: The president was elected by a parliament that was itself elected by 14,025 clan elder-appointed delegates. Al-Shabaab is also relying on the same clan-based structure to gather intelligence, recruit members and advance its ideologies. It uses this structure to force sheiks and imams to teach jihad or face expulsion or death. According to many Somalis and clan leaders, Somalis are Muslims and therefore conversion to Christianity is a betrayal of Somali family and clan. As a result, if Somalis are suspected of being converts, family members and clan leaders will harass, intimidate and even kill them.

Organized corruption and crime (very strong):

In its fragile and lawless situation, crime and corruption is rampant in Somalia. The federal government controls only some cities and towns and leaves the majority of rural Somalia to be controlled by al-Shabaab. Militants collect taxes and fund their operations through illegal trade. This situation has made life for Christians very delicate as they have no protection whatsoever. In Transparency International's Corruption Index released on January 2017 Somalia is listed as the worst country in the world.³⁸

Drivers of persecution

Drivers of persecution in Somalia	
Government officials at any level from local to national	Very Strong
Ethnic group leaders	Very strong
Non-Christian religious leaders at any level from local to national	Very Strong
Christian religious leaders at any level from local to national	Not at all
Violent religious groups	Very Strong
Ideological pressure groups	Not at all
Normal citizens (people from the general public), including mobs	Very Strong
Own (extended) family	Very Strong
Political parties at any level from local to national	Very strong
Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups	Not at all
Organized crime cartels or networks	Strong
Multilateral organizations (e.g. UN) and embassies	Not at all

The main drivers of persecution in Somalia are indeed those who subscribe to the ideology of the clan system and radical militant groups in the country. As stated above, Muslim religious leaders state publicly

³⁸ See: https://www.transparency.org/news/feature/corruption_perceptions_index_2016, last accessed 15 September 2017.

that there is no room for Christianity, al-Shabaab kill Somalis who are suspected of being converts to Christianity, and family and community also cause serious persecution for converts. Political parties, even though not well developed, also buy into the idea that Somalia is for Somalis – and being Somali means being Muslim. Society in general and family members are against any thought of conversion to Christianity. Networks of organized crime cartels profit from the lawlessness in Somalia. Al-Shabaab also engages in illegal trade and taxation as a means of income.

Context

Radical Islam is not a new phenomenon in Somalia. In 1899 Muhammad Abdullah Hassan called Darvish State into existence (a Sunni Islamic state). He decided to set up a caliphate having seen Somali orphans identifying themselves as Catholics which he saw as a betrayal of Somali culture and Islamic faith.

In Somalia, Islam was firmly established before the arrival of Christianity. Ever since colonial interventions by Italy and Britain took place, severe resistance has been triggered against Christianity. In addition, Somali society is clan-based. Somalia's tribal system - an informal way of governing Somalia - is very resistant to modern government models and more robust than the formal state structure. In the process of extending security and governance and trying to maintain relations with the Somali clans, the formal government has not prioritized civil liberties and rule of law. According to Freedom House, freedom of association, religion and belief are highly restricted in the country.³⁹ The government also allows anti-Christian sentiments to flourish within the tribal system. This is clearly reflected in the Constitution of Somalia.⁴⁰

Violent radical groups emerged following the collapse of central government in 1991. Since the downfall of Ziad Barre in 1991, Somalia has become a safe haven for Islamic jihadists, causing society to become more aggressive and intolerant towards Christians not only in the country but also in the surrounding region. In majority of the cases Christians in Somalia (in areas under the control of al-Shabaab) would not last a day in a trial or ever get the chance to be sentenced to a labor camp. The mere suspicion of someone being a Christian leads to a rushed public execution. This should be seen in connection with the attacks that al-Shabaab has orchestrated against Christians in Kenya. There is also another militant group that has been trying to establish itself in Somalia, namely Islamic State (IS). IS has been courting al-Shabaab to make it ditch al-Qaeda and join the IS caliphate. In April 2016, IS [claimed responsibility](#)⁴¹ for an attack on African Union troops. However, an attempt by some factions among al-Shabaab to join the IS has so far failed to materialize as planned.

The current regime is in the process of establishing itself. The Federal Government of Somalia was set up in August 2012 after the interim mandate of the Transitional Federal Government ended, and has been boosted by the military gains of the African Union forces against al-Shabaab. However, in terms of freedom for Christians, there has been no progress. The provisional Constitution limits freedom of religion and only

³⁹ See: <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2016/somalia>, last accessed 15 September 2017.

⁴⁰ Under the Somali Constitution, Islam is the state religion and any propagation of other religions except Islam is prohibited.

⁴¹ See: <http://www.ibtimes.com/isis-somalia-islamic-state-claims-first-ever-attack-mogadishu-while-courting-al-2359373>, last accessed 8 December 2016.

goes to show how regressive the situation in Somalia is. For instance, apostasy was not listed as a crime under the previous transitional charter, whereas now the provisional Constitution explicitly prohibits apostasy. Also, in order to appease and boost its support among the clan leaders, the government has at times issued clear directives such as banning the celebration of Christmas in December 2015 by stating that the a Christian festival has “[nothing to do with Islam](#)”⁴². In 2017 the country elected a new president and even though there is fresh optimism surrounding this election, there is no guarantee that the president will stand up for minorities in the country. However, frequent deadly attacks by al-Shabaab is taking that optimism away.

Somaliland and the autonomous province of Puntland are fairly stable, but there too, there is no room for Christians. The closure of a church after it was officially reopened for one week in the capital of Somaliland, Hargeisa, is an example.⁴³

In Somalia, except for Islam other religious groups do not have meaningful rights. In areas controlled by al-Shabaab, the situation has become so extreme that even Sunni Muslims often go underground. As stated above, laws in Somalia prohibit the propagation of any religion other than Islam and prohibit Muslims from converting. The Constitution also states that all laws must comply with the general principles of Sharia. In this context any other religion except Islam will experience severe challenges.

Christian communities and how they are affected

Communities of expatriate Christians:

Since this group is restricted to chaplaincies for soldiers (e.g. among officers of the African Union Mission – AMISOM) and foreign workers in Mogadishu, and some refugees in Hargeisa (Somaliland) it is not regarded as a separate WWL category. Considering this type of Christian community as one type of Christianity in Somalia would misrepresent the general situation as well. This group is more or less insulated from the harsh realities that converts face in the country. That means most of the questions in the questionnaire are not applicable. Hence, this group is not considered for WWL analysis.

Historical Christian communities:

These do not exist in the country.

Non-traditional Christian communities:

These do not exist in the country.

Communities of converts to Christianity:

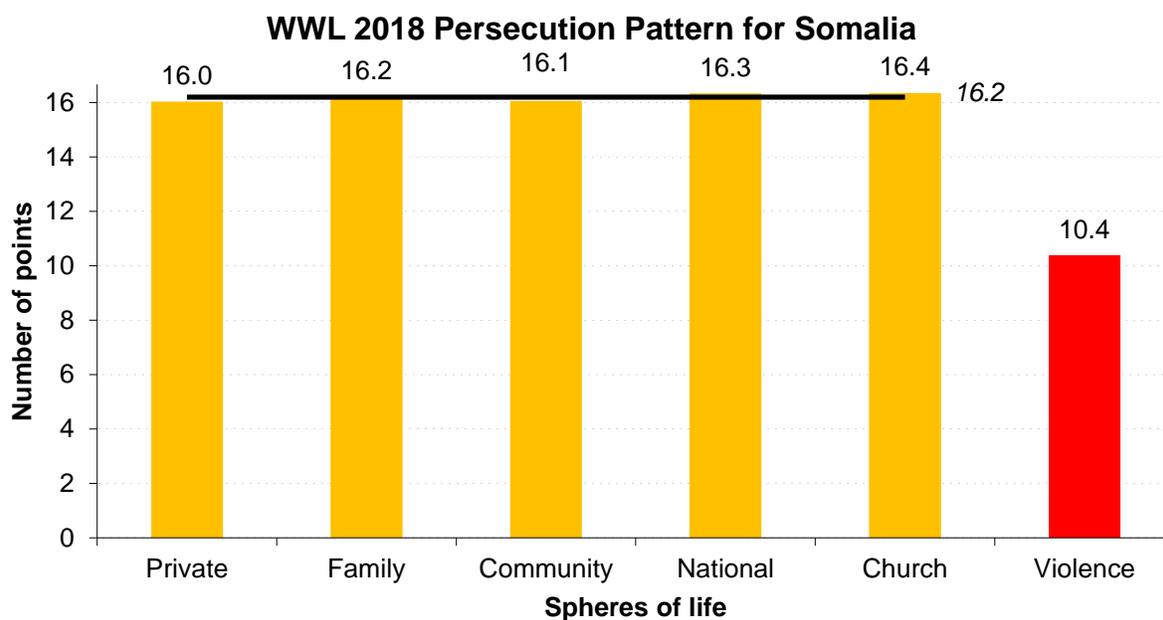
Christians with a Muslim background face the worst form of persecution and are considered a high-value target by al-Shabaab operatives. In the country’s very recent history, converts - or those accused of being

⁴² See: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-christmas-season-somalia-idUSKBN0U61NT20151223>, last accessed 8 December 2016.

⁴³ See <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/coe/somaliland-closes-catholic-church-due-public-pressure-re-opened-week-ago-30-years/> last accessed 01 December 2017.

converts - have often been killed on the spot when discovered. Over the WWL 2018 reporting period, the situation has not improved. Islamic militants intensified their hunt for people who are Christian and in a position of leadership. Consequently, Christians have to do everything in their power to keep their faith secret. They have fellowships in small, isolated groups. In the past years, al-Shabaab retreated from main cities and has blended into the local communities. In those areas controlled by al-Shabaab, converts face more danger.

Pressure in the 5 spheres of life and violence



(The maximum score for each block is 16.7.)

The Persecution pattern shows:

- Christians in Somalia experience extreme pressure in all *spheres of life*. The average pressure on Christians has remained stable at a level of 16.2.
- Pressure is strongest in the *Church sphere* (since having a visible church-building in the country has become virtually impossible) followed by the *National sphere*.
- The score for violence against Christians is 10.4 compared to 10.2 in WWL 2017. The violence score is mainly due to the actions of the radical Islamic militants, al-Shabaab, who have openly declared that there is no room for any Christians in Somalia.
- The overall persecution situation in Somalia reveals that there is a strong desire within society to eliminate Christianity from the country.

Private sphere:

Individual Christians in Somalia face severe difficulties in trying to live according to their faith. They have to pray in secret and do not own or carry Christian materials or symbols as these would be seen as evidence against them, should they be caught. They have to constantly move places of worship. They have to hide their conversion to Christianity not only from their extended family and clan members, but also from their own closest family members. The family will not only be unsympathetic towards Christianity, they will also fear being suspected of being converts too. According to one country researcher, Christians hardly dare to express their faith in any form: “There is a worldwide Somali Christian social media network, and just 'liking' a post on that social media network invites serious danger.”

Family sphere:

Celebrating weddings according to Christian faith or celebrating Christian holidays in a family is virtually impossible. Somali children have to participate in mandatory Islamic classes, and Christian parents often find it too dangerous to teach their children about their Christian faith. Converts or suspected Christians face all sorts of discrimination when it comes to custody of children, inheritance rights and divorce. In order to escape these challenges Christian families usually keep their faith as secret as possible.

Community sphere:

Christians from a Muslim background are under pressure from members of their community in various ways. One country researcher reports: “Suspected converts get intimidating messages via phone calls from 'concerned' community members or even from al-Shabaab personnel who would tell them they have heard rumors of their conversion or have observed some 'contrary' behavior [contrary behavior according to the Quran] and first warn them to change or risk death.” To survive such threats and other similar problems, Somali Christians have to hide their religion in order to get access to basic social services or education. Christian women have to dress like Muslims in order to hide their faith.

National sphere:

This sphere of life is critical for analyzing persecution in a given country, since policies or laws that emanate from national or regional level set the tone for how things are implemented at local level. In Somalia, the Constitution has set it out loud and clear that Islam is the state religion and Sharia is the source for all laws. There are no provisions exempting non-Muslims from the application of Sharia law. Officials at the federal and local level enforce laws that limit a Christian’s freedom severely, which has left Christians with no option but to live out their faith in secret.

Church sphere:

There are no recognizable church buildings in the country. Many churches were destroyed in the past decades. In the past, attempts to reopen a Catholic cathedral in Mogadishu failed. There was one church reopened for a week in Hargeisa (Somaliland) but it was closed after pressure from the Islamic community. In short, church life is very restricted and has to remain underground. Christians gather in small fellowship groups and meet in secret across the country. These house-churches have to move location constantly to avoid possible monitoring by al-Shabaab and community leaders.

Violence:

Somali Christians face faith-related violence from family, clan, authorities, and militias. Al-Shabaab has already publically declared that it “wants Somalia free of all Christians”. According to one country researcher: “Whenever Christians are attacked and killed - especially in terror attacks - they do not acknowledge that they were killed because of their faith so that the living ones who are associated with the victims could not be targeted.” In the WWL 2018 reporting period, at least three converts were forced to leave the country, and at least eight have been forced to relocate inside the country. A country researcher reported that - despite mainstream media ignoring the killings - around 23 (assumed) Christian converts were killed by al-Shabaab in the WWL 2018 reporting period.

Gender profile of persecution

Female:

One researcher reports: “Women and girls were pressured into attending Duksi classes, dressing in al-Shabaab compliant burkas, forcefully married off, suffered domestic violence, beaten up by family and spouses, verbally abused, put under 'house arrest', denied food and rights, lost their businesses, were threatened and forced to go into hiding with some seeking refuge outside the country, denied access to their children, were widowed and some even killed on suspicions of their faith.”

Male:

According to one researcher, men and boys suspected of conversion to Christianity faced extreme levels of persecution: “Men and boys were verbally abused, physically assaulted, businesses taken over, threatened with death, tortured, burnt alive and others shot to death.”

Future outlook

Somalia has been on the World Watch List since 1993 and will no doubt continue to be listed high up. The government of Somalia has managed to survive another year with the help of troops from African Union (AU) backed by the United Nations Security Council, which decided once again to extend the mandate of the AU troops stationed in the country. The US has also continued with airstrikes against al-Shabaab, especially depleting its leadership. Islamic State has kept courting al-Shabaab though not very successfully so far.

With this background, a look into the future does not look promising:

- Even though the election of Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed as the new president was welcomed by many Western governments, it is unlikely that the Somalia government will prove robust and a protector of minorities in the country.
- Al-Shabaab will continue targeting converts to Christianity.
- It is unlikely that any of the severely damaged church buildings can ever be reopened.

- If AU troops were to leave the country, al-Shabaab would be emboldened again and might pose an even greater threat to Christians in the country and beyond.

Policy Considerations

The issues in Somalia are very complex and it is important that a balanced approach is made on a variety of fronts:

- The UN should not only extend the presence of AU troops in the country, it should also urge the Somali government to respect the rights of minorities, especially religious minorities.
- Some Middle Eastern countries are trying to establish their military bases in the country. It is very important that these countries help Somalia protect minorities in the country.
- The protection of minorities in Somalia must be a part of any post-conflict reconstruction efforts.

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4. Sudan

Reporting period: 1 November 2016 - 31 October 2017

Position on World Watch List (WWL)

WWL 2018 Points: 87 / Position: 4

WWL 2017 Points: 87 / Position: 5

WWL 2016 Points: 84 / Position: 8

Sudan has become a country where Christians face serious restrictions individually and collectively. Scoring 87 points in the WWL 2018 reporting period, the country has intensified its demolition of churches and arrest of Christians. This is one of the results that emanates from the application of full Sharia law that President al-Bashir vowed to implement following the secession of South Sudan. The Islamist and dictatorial government has also continued its policy of persecuting Christians in the Nuba region. Christian pastors were arrested and tried but later released after intensive pressure from the international community. At least three Christians were killed.

Persecution engines

Persecution engines ⁴⁴	
Islamic oppression	Very strong
Religious nationalism	Not at all
Ethnic antagonism	strong
Denominational protectionism	Not at all.
Communist and post-Communist oppression	Not at all
Secular intolerance	Not at all
Dictatorial paranoia	Very strong
Organized corruption and crime	Very strong

Islamic oppression (Very strong):

This persecution engine is rooted in the Muslim Brotherhood ideology advocated by the founder of the current ruling party, Hassan al-Turabi, who helped Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir consolidate power during a bloodless coup in 1989. The Sudanese government is not only working towards forming an Islamic state at the expense of other religious groups in the country, but has also been accused of supporting radical Islamic militants for the past three decades. The United States first labeled Sudan as a state sponsor of terrorism on 12 August 1993 for knowingly harboring local and international terrorists and for allowing the country to be used as a transit point for terrorists and weapons. Historically, Islam - including its radical tendencies (e.g. the 19th century Mahdist movement) - is firmly rooted in Sudanese society. The country had also hosted Osama Bin Laden before he moved to Afghanistan. The overwhelming majority of the population in the country is Sunni Muslim. Sharia law is the foundation of Sudan's legal system and Sudan's elite has aimed at enforcing an Islamic regime in the country. Apostasy is criminalized, punishable by the death penalty. Blasphemy laws are being used country-wide to prosecute Christians.

Dictatorial paranoia (Very strong):

Sudan is run by an authoritarian regime since al-Bashir came to power through a coup in 1989. The influence of the government in private and public life is enormous. The country has its own deep-rooted challenges: The Darfur crisis has continued, the conflict with Sudan's People Liberation Movement North (SPLM-N) shows no sign of reaching a permanent solution even though ceasefire agreements were reached. Some argue that the agreements were made due to the pressure of sanctions from the US government and that the Sudanese government complied in the hope that the sanctions would be lifted. Whenever President al-Bashir's government faces socio-economic and political challenges, support among the population at large is revived by using inflammatory language against the West. This in turn has an

⁴⁴ The scale for the level of influence of Persecution engines and Drivers in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong.

adverse effect on Sudanese Christians, as the government regards Christians as the agents of Western countries.

Even though the majority of Sudanese are Sunni Muslims, the government of Sudan has strong ties with Shia Iran. There seems to be a symbiotic relationship between *Islamic oppression* and *Dictatorial paranoia*. Moreover, it has become apparent that those leading the regime are mainly people with radical ideologies. The ruling National Congress Party (NCP), therefore, is serving as a means to strengthen the Islamic agenda. This implies that the role of the government in the persecution of Christians is not only driven by totalitarian tendencies but also by radical Islamist sympathies as well. In the past three decades the willingness of the current president of Sudan to opportunistically discard beliefs and promises in exchange for hanging on to power, has become increasingly evident. Almost all of his decisions – whether related to supporting terrorist and armed militias groups or cracking down on all forms of dissent - are motivated mainly, if not solely, by the desire to stay in power at all costs. It is also worth noting that the International Criminal Court (ICC) has indicted President Omar al-Bashir of war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide for what has happened in Sudan under his leadership - but his desire to stay in power at all costs remains strong.

Organized corruption and crime (Very strong):

The government of Sudan is employing all means available to make sure that its plan of staying in power remains fruitful. There is a coordinated governmental effort aimed at mobilizing and militarizing local tribal militias (including but not limited to Arab militias) known as Janjaweed, and using these groups to work towards creating an Islamic state at the expense of other religious groups in the country. A number of reports by different human right groups have accused these militias of committing gross violation of human rights against the non-Arab citizens of Sudan in conjunction with the government. Christians are among the minorities who are victims of this sort of organized crime.

Ethnic antagonism (Strong):

The Sudanese population consists of about 19 different ethnic groups and almost 600 subgroups. Most of the inhabitants of the southern parts of the country are of Ethnic African origin, and Arabs live predominantly in the northern parts of the country. Due to the deeply religious nature of the Sudanese people, most of the population are adherents to a certain faith, mainly to Christianity or Islam, however indigenous religions still persist. For many years, the Arabs from the North have tried to spread not only Islam, but also a specific prestigious cultural and ethnic identity associated with Arabism. This led to decades of civil war and was ultimately responsible for the independence of South Sudan.

Drivers of persecution

Drivers of persecution	
Government officials at any level from local to national	Very Strong
Ethnic group leaders	Very strong
Non-Christian religious leaders at any level from local to national	Very Strong

Christian religious leaders at any level from local to national	Not at all
Violent religious groups	Very Strong
Ideological pressure groups	Not at all
Normal citizens (people from the general public), including mobs	Strong
Own (extended) family	Strong
Political parties at any level from local to national	Strong
Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups	Not at all
Organized crime cartels or networks	strong
Multilateral organizations (e.g. UN) and embassies	Not at all

The drivers of persecution in Sudan are government officials, government supported groups and all who subscribe to the Islamic ideology refusing to allow conversion and refusing to allow a place for Christians in the country. Imams in mosques and madrassas preach anti-Christian sentiment. Followers of Wahhabism and advocates of Sharia law (as the basis for regulating all aspects of life in Sudan) are closing the spaces available for Christian life. State security forces are arresting, harassing and intimidating Christians, and demolishing churches. Violent religious groups organized as militias are responsible for the death and destruction of property of Christians all over the country. What is more troubling in this regard is the alleged association between the government and these violent religious groups. Government officials are also forcing Christians to go to school on Sundays. There are also ethnic leaders that are backed by the government in different parts of the country. The ruling National Congress Party (which was founded in 1996 and is headed by the president) has also pushed for the application of Sharia law in the country. Finally, especially Christian converts face serious persecution from family, extended family members and the community at large.

Context

Surrounded by Egypt, Libya, Chad, Central African Republic, South Sudan, Ethiopia, Eritrea, and the Red Sea, the country has never been out of the spotlight due to the wars and conflicts that have engulfed it for decades. The current civil war in South Sudan has diverted the international community's attention away from the crimes being committed by the al-Bashir government. Al-Bashir is in fact presenting himself as a peacemaker helping to solve the conflict in South Sudan, while in reality he is arming both factions.

The persecution of Christians in Sudan is not a simple violation of freedom of religion. It is systematic and more reminiscent of a policy of *ethnic cleansing*. The persecution is not a collection of isolated incidents, but rather a pattern. Historically, Islam is deeply embedded in Sudan's society, but, paradoxically, even though Christianity preceded Islam as a religion in Sudan by hundreds of years, Christianity is perceived as being foreign to Sudanese culture. Sudan is one of a few African countries that has consistently been on the World Watch List since its first launch (for internal research purposes) in 1993. The country's rank on the list has been oscillating mostly between the top ten and the top twenty countries. This is in line with how reports by other governmental and nongovernmental organizations characterize the human rights situation and freedom of religion in particular. Furthermore, for the past decades there was no rule of law

in Sudan; press and media laws have been restrictive, and freedom of expression and religion has been highly curtailed. Yet President al-Bashir and his government showed their power by claiming more than 90% of the votes in a landslide victory in the elections held in April 2015 - despite grievances among sections of the population about the country's weakened economic position due to the loss of oil revenue which is in South Sudan's hands. The merging of the war between Sudan and SPLM-N and South Sudan is creating another dimension to the challenges faced by minorities in the country.

The ethnic-cultural landscape in the country is very diverse and complicated: Arab versus Ethnic African and Muslim versus Christian. The secession of South Sudan did not solve these problems. This is particularly true for Ethnic Africans, as a significant number are Christian and still living in the country. The government of Sudan is strictly implementing the policy of one religion, one culture and one language. This policy has been practiced for many decades and was reiterated by President al-Bashir in 2010 when he declared that Sharia law is to be the main source for the Constitution, Islam the official religion and Arabic the official language of Sudan. Thus, President al-Bashir has continued to put immense pressure on Ethnic African Christians remaining in Sudan, especially in South Kordofan and Blue Nile states.

The government of Sudan seems to be repeating the policy it employed in the 1980s and 1990s. During that period, the government of Sudan devised a strategy to “decimate the people of the Nuba Mountains by denying them basic human needs such as food, medical attention, and adequate shelter”.⁴⁵ The situation in the Nuba Mountains is exacerbated by the fact that the civil war in South Sudan and the conflict with SPLA-N have merged together in the border region of the two countries. It can be argued that *ethnic cleansing* is being perpetrated against Christians here.

Sudan tried its best (but failed) to prevent the secession of South Sudan, and now al-Bashir is suspected of using the war between the two main tribes in South Sudan, the Nuer and Dinka, to weaken the country by arming both groups. Equally important is the fact that President al-Bashir is accused of using the tactics to divert attention away from his arrest warrant issued by the International Criminal Court (ICC). The fact that many African countries are pushing to withdraw from the ICC is a moral victory for al-Bashir. In its 2017 report, the USCIRF designated Sudan as a country of particular concern (CPC) and recommended the same to the State Department.⁴⁶ The US State Department re-designated Sudan a “Country of Particular Concern” (CPC) on 31 October 2016 for the 17th consecutive year for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom – as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). In conclusion, the corrosive connection between *Islamic oppression* and *Dictatorial paranoia* is making the lives of Christians unbearable.

Religious minorities in Sudan are not properly protected and it is hence not just Christians who suffer persecution. There are no properly defined laws and procedures to protect religious minorities. Radical Islamic groups in the country are becoming a threat not only to non-Muslims, but also to moderate (Sunni) Muslims, Sufis and Shia Muslims.

⁴⁵ Totten S. and Grzyb A., *Conflict in the Nuba Mountains - From Genocide by Attrition to Contemporary Sudan Crisis*, 2017, p.2.

⁴⁶ See: <http://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/Sudan.2017.pdf>, last accessed 15 September 2017.

Christian communities and how they are affected

In Sudan all Christian communities face persecution. However, the level of persecution that Christians from a Muslim background and ethnic Africans face is enormous. Many of them have been arrested and charged with crimes like espionage; many churches have been demolished and it is planned to continue this action; many Christians are attacked indiscriminately in areas such as the Nuba Mountains region where government forces and rebel groups are in conflict.

Communities of expatriate Christians:

Expatriates are being forced to close their churches. These are groups mainly from Western countries and South Sudan. Their churches have faced demolition and have been denied registration. Some of them face arrest and detention without due process of law.

Historical Christian communities:

Christians belonging to historical churches such as the Coptic Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches face persecution resulting from both *Islamic oppression* and *Dictatorial paranoia*. Judging by the program of church demolition in the country, it can be said that the government has set its agenda to close the majority, if not all, churches in the country, including those belonging to the Historical Christian communities.

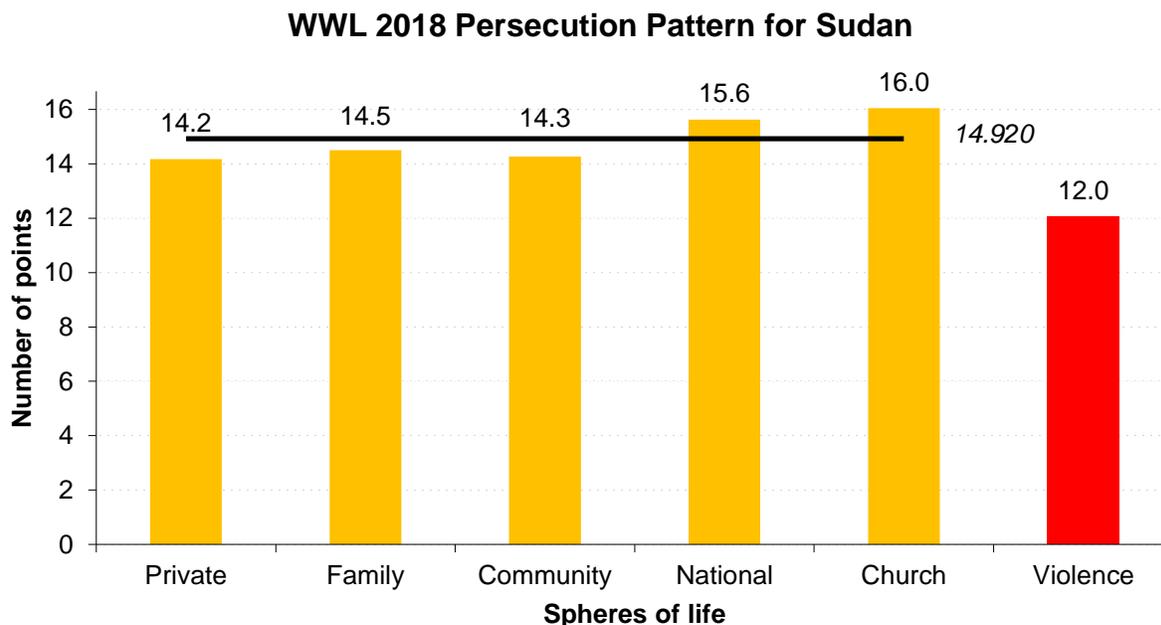
Communities of converts to Christianity:

This group, which consists mainly of Christians with a Muslim background, experiences the most intense pressure. Not only do converts feel the pressure of persecution in the *national* and *church spheres of the life*, but also in severe form from family and neighbors in their *community, family and private life*.

Non-traditional Christian communities:

Sudanese who belong to Baptist, Evangelical and Pentecostal denominations also face persecution from *Islamic oppression* and *dictatorial paranoia*. This group is also facing the prospect of having most of its churches in the country closed down.

Pressure in the 5 spheres of life and violence



(The maximum score for each block is 16.7.)

The Persecution pattern shows:

- Overall, there has been an increase in pressure on Christians in all *Spheres of life* (especially in the *Church sphere*). This has caused the average pressure on Christians in Sudan to rise from 14.8 in WWL 2017 to 14.9.
- Pressure is strongest in the *Church sphere of life* (16.0). The government of Sudan has put massive pressure on the Church and church leaders in many ways. For example: Legitimate church leaders have been pressured into handing over the leadership of their church to a government supported committee. Some church leaders and their families are experiencing intimidation on daily basis.
- The score for violence has gone down to 12.0 compared to 13.3 in WWL 2017. This is mainly due to fewer Christians being killed than in the previous reporting period.
- Converts from Islam to Christianity face the worst form of persecution in almost all *Spheres of life*.

Private sphere:

There is a clear law to punish Christians, especially those coming from a Muslim background. Article 126 of the Criminal Code states: "Whoever propagates the renunciation of Islam or publicly renounces it by explicit words or an act of definitive indication is said to commit the offence of apostasy." In the past, there were cases wherein converts to Christianity were sentenced to death for holding mere conversations. Christian converts are particularly affected since the law punishes conversion from Islam to another religion by death. According to one country researcher: "Due to the risk of discovery and use as evidence against them by family, society and officials, [converts] would refrain from owning Christian materials or accessing Christians TV or internet." Furthermore, all categories of Christians are afraid of having

conversations about their faith with Sudanese Muslims as these might be construed as being “acts that encourage apostasy against Islam”.

Family sphere:

Christians in the country face different forms of persecution in this *sphere of life*. Sudan is not an easy place for Christian to easily marry. If a marriage is between a Muslim and Christian, the Christian is expected to convert to Islam. While the law to a certain extent allows that non-Muslims will not be subjected to the application of Islamic law which the government wants to impose, in practice a Christian wedding will not take place as smoothly as a wedding between to Muslims. Christian children are often harassed in school or playgrounds due to their parent’s faith. Child custody or inheritance is made complicated for Christians solely due to their faith. This is another *sphere of life* where converts suffer the most and the problems even extend to funerals as deceased converts with a Muslim background are often buried according to Islamic rites in Muslim cemeteries, even though Christian and Muslim cemeteries are separate. Converts also often refrain from raising their children as Christians because this might attract the attention of the government (since the children might inadvertently reveal the faith of their parents).

Community sphere:

In addition to the simple harassments and threats that Christians face in their daily lives, it is very important to distinguish between what is going on in the Nuba Mountain and Blue Nile regions of the country and what is taking place in other parts of the country, especially in the cities. Starting in June 2011, the government of Sudan has been carrying out ground offensives and an aerial bombardment campaign against alleged “rebels.” Most experts of the region know however that the intention of the government of Sudan and the militias carrying out these attacks has one goal in mind, namely ethically cleansing the area of minority ethnic groups, and most importantly of Christians. Thousands of Christians have been killed because of attacks from government-supported groups and many thousands have been displaced from their villages for no reason other than having a religion different from those leading the country.

Public order laws, based largely on the government’s strict interpretation of Islamic law, are in force in Khartoum State and prohibit “indecent dresses” and other “offenses of honor, reputation, and public morality”. Islamic morality police have been known to harass and arrest Christians for not following official dressing codes. Christians also suffer discrimination when it comes to assuming public offices or sharing community resources. In addition, Christians, especially converts, are monitored by Muslim religious leaders and politicians. Christians also face immense pressure to renounce their faith.

National sphere:

At the national level, the general environment is not favorable to Christians. Christians are regarded as second-class citizens. Even though Article 38 of the Interim Constitution guarantees freedom of religion, the ruling party believes that the country belongs to Muslims. Emanating from this, almost all of laws and policies are derived from Sharia and are not flexible to accommodate freedom of religion. The other laws also limit freedom of religion in their additional claw-back clauses. Christians - especially those from South Sudan and Western missionaries – are frequently monitored by government security forces. Conversion from Islam to Christianity is not only considered unlawful under the current laws of the country, it can lead to hostility within the family of converts. There have been instances where converts have been put under

house-arrest by family members for the mere fact of conversion to Christianity. The case of Mariam Yahia Ibrahim, who was sentenced to death for apostasy, but later released due to the pressure from the international community, is a good example showing the extent of risk involved for anyone who decided to convert his/her religion from Islam to Christianity.⁴⁷

One country researcher also states: “Because of the Islamic law being implemented in the country it is very difficult for non-Muslims to get licenses to open business when compared to Muslim business owners. In addition to the legal limitation it is also worth noting that most Christian business owners are discriminated by customers because of their religion. In most cases while dealing with the government, it is very difficult for Christian business owners to win government sponsored bids because of the discriminatory attitude of the government officials in charge of the government offices responsible for these bids.”

Church sphere:

In the WWL 2018 reporting period, the church *sphere of life* is unique in the sense that more than 20 churches have been forced to shut down and demolished. One country researcher reported that the Sudanese government has increasingly interfered in the internal running of religious institutions. Due to rules issued by the Ministry of Guidance and Religious Endowment, pastors have felt forced to censor themselves and curtail their activities. In some places, Sudanese security forces have forced Christians to hand over their Christian schools. Christians have found it difficult to build new churches, the major obstacle being the government offices responsible for issuing the required permit. Even if a permit is issued, Christians then face challenges from local Islamic leaders and radical Muslims on a daily basis. One researcher states: “Of course, the level of monitoring and obstruction varies from one part of the country to another. While Christians in the capital city and other major cities are subject to monitoring and obstruction mainly from government forces, churches in the remote parts of the country especially in areas affected by the civil war are subject to more obstruction and monitoring from both government and non-government groups.” Furthermore, the government keeps interfering in church business and plays a significant role in setting up rival church committees which replace church-elected committees. The government then endorses these rival committees and allows them to sell churches behind the backs of the main congregation.

Violence:

The extreme level of violence against Christians has resulted from the persecution engines operating together. Christians are being targeted indiscriminately in the Nuba Mountains region by government security forces, although the government claims it is targeting rebels. Churches and Christian properties are being targeted and pastors are being prosecuted for speaking out against persecution in the country. Christians have been arrested during the WWL 2018 reporting period because of their faith. Christian Pastors Hassan Abduraheem Kodi Taour, Kuwa Shamal and a Czech missionary were tried and sentenced,

⁴⁷ Meriam Yahia Ibrahim Ishag (referred to by family and court as Abrar al Hadi) was arrested in September 2013 after a family member tracked her down and accused her of adultery for her marriage to a Christian man. She faced the death sentence and gave birth to a girl in prison on 27 May 2014. She was released from prison in June 2014 after international protest, finally being able to leave the country in July.

even though they were finally released after intense pressure from the international community. They were accused of “espionage”, “waging war against the state” and “inciting hatred against religious congregations”. More than 20 Christians and Christian leaders were arrested in the WWL 2018 reporting period and at least three Christians were killed.

Gender profile of persecution

Female:

Female Christians in the country face tremendous challenges. They are forced to dress like Muslims. Girls who are arrested for “indecent dressing” often face groping and humiliation during interrogation. The apostasy ordeal that Mariam Yehya Ibrahim had to go through, even giving birth in jail in May 2014, serves as an example of the sort of treatment a Christian woman in Sudan can experience.

Male:

The government targets male Christians with a variety of serious charges. For instance, the security forces often accuse Christian males of spying for the West. This has the potential to cause family disintegration and weaken the Church.

Future outlook

Known for its poor record in human rights, the government of Sudan has continued violating the rights of Christians in the country. The country has been gradually increasing in score over the last few years on the World Watch List. It has also been on the US State Department’s list of “Countries of Particular Concern (CPC)” since 1999. On 31 October 2016, the country was pre-designated as CPC.

Pressure from the international community helped the release of some Christians who were detained because of their faith; however, the government has not changed its general behavior towards Christians. The looting and destruction of churches, hospitals and schools are all common, especially in the Nuba Mountains region. Despite the fact that President al-Bashir faces two international arrest warrants, the international community’s attention has been diverted to the troubles in South Sudan and the outbreak of civil war there among the two-main rival ethnic groups.

Looking to the future, the following are very likely:

- The arrest of Christians will continue.
- The demolition of churches will continue.
- Both persecution engines, *Islamic oppression* and *Dictatorial paranoia*, will remain the main engines in the country
- Christians will continue to find it difficult to get building permits for churches.

- The government of Sudan will in all likelihood continue targeting the Nuba Christians indiscriminately.

Policy considerations

The government of Sudan does not show any willingness to cease its animosity toward Christians. Open Doors suggests the following policy considerations:

- The US State Department should continue designating the country as CPC.
- THE USCIRF should continue recommending the designation of the country as CPC.
- It has been found that EU countries are directly dealing with the government of Sudan with respect to controlling migrants that cross through Sudan. The Sudanese government is using part of that fund to finance Janjaweed fighters. EU countries must insist on high level accountability when it comes to respecting human rights.
- The government of Sudan must be pressed to stop arresting, harassing and intimidating Christians.
- The government of Sudan must cease the demolition of churches immediately.

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5. Pakistan

Reporting period: 1 November 2016 - 31 October 2017

Position on World Watch List (WWL)

WWL 2018: Points: 86 / Position: 5

WWL 2017: Points: 88 / Position: 4

WWL 2016: Points: 87 / Position: 6

Pakistan remains one of the countries where it is most difficult to live as a Christian. The slight decrease in points in some *Spheres of life* does not indicate an overall easier situation for Christians. This is illustrated by the fact that the violence score has stayed at the maximum level (very few WWL countries ever achieve maximum score in this category), even though for the first time in three years there was no successful bomb-attack on a church at Easter; security forces foiled an attempt, see section on “Violence” below. Despite this, at least 15 Christians were killed during the reporting period, frequently in connection with the country’s notorious blasphemy laws.

Persecution engines

Persecution engines in Pakistan ⁴⁸	
Islamic oppression	Very strong
Religious nationalism	Not at all
Ethnic antagonism	Strong
Denominational protectionism	Weak
Communist and post-Communist oppression	Not at all
Secular intolerance	Weak
Dictatorial paranoia	Strong
Organized corruption and crime	Very Strong

Islamic oppression:

Pakistan suffers from a plethora of radical Islamic groups and witnesses an increasingly Islamizing culture. The Christian community feels increasingly trapped in the crosshairs of those groups and culture. Well-meaning politicians, judges and religious leaders, considering or even advocating for an amendment of the country's notorious blasphemy laws, are openly threatened by those who hold a radical perspective based on *Wahhabi* ideology and who continue to buy into the caliphate theology and treatment of infidels, firmly identifying themselves with supporters of the Islamic State group (IS) and the Taliban. The increasing presence of militants specifically naming Christians as their targets has worsened the situation for Christians in the region. Radical Islamic groups are flourishing - despite a continued crackdown on some of them by the army - and are used by different political groups as allies. Their power to mobilize hundreds of thousands of predominantly young people and take them to the streets remains a political tool and a strong leverage for enforcing political goals.

Banned radical Islamic groups do not simply dissolve into nothing, in most cases they simply re-brand and build charity fronts or [go online](#)⁴⁹, wooing the general populace with social services and the youth with a perspective which it is badly lacking in the country. Given that the majority of the population is below 25 years old (and almost one third even below 14), the necessity to grant perspectives to them is a trend that will not cease quickly and brings enormous challenges with it. While life expectancy is not very high at 67.7

⁴⁸ The scale for the level of influence of Persecution engines and Drivers in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong.

⁴⁹ See: https://www.apnews.com/8ef62cab253941ec8169427bdac62886/Many-organizations-banned-in-Pakistan-thrive-online?utm_source=Pew+Research+Center&utm_campaign=d2519be1c5-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2017_07_11&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_3e953b9b70-d2519be1c5-399904105, 11 July 2017, last accessed 25 August 2017.

years, the total fertility rate stands at 2.68. If the fertility rate remains at this level, Pakistan will become the largest Muslim country in the world, overtaking Indonesia, in approximately 2030. This social structure leads to scores of young people leaving school, dreaming of a better future. As the country struggles to give a perspective even to the well-educated and the academics among the younger generation, this builds the basis for social unrest, which in turn paves the way for radical Islamic groups luring young people into their arms, giving them a feeling of worth they have never had before.

Organized corruption and crime:

Corruption is rampant in Pakistan on all levels of administration and in the army. The army is deeply entrenched into the country's economy and a strong competitor in many economic fields. It enjoys unfair advantages which a popular joke about the army illustrates well: "All countries have armies, but here, an army has a country." Although it is difficult to access details, estimations say that the military holds assets valued at around 10 billion USD, including around 5 million hectares of farmland. The fact that President Nawaz Sharif was ousted by a decision of the Supreme Court because of corruption discovered through the Panama Papers, shows that corruption is by no means limited to the army.

Organized crime affects Christians in particular since many of them are poor and without defense, especially in blasphemy cases. This was shown in [April 2016](#)⁵⁰ when a court granted bail to the chief suspect in a case where a Christian couple had been killed in a brick oven because of alleged blasphemy on 4 November 2014. Although five suspects were [sentenced to death](#)⁵¹ on 23 November 2016, the structural injustice behind this case remains untouched. The couple had been working as bonded laborers in the third generation for a brick manufacturer. These laborers depend completely on the mercy of their employers and have no way out since they will never be able to pay their loans back due to the high interest rates. They have no legal way of registering complaints and are left without any defense or perspective.

Ethnic antagonism:

Pakistan suffers from ethnic fragmentation, not only in society but also in the country's administration. The Baluchistan province and central Sindh regions are traditionally perceived as being beyond the reach of the state authorities. Feudal landowners maintain their own private militias, courts and prisons in parts of rural Sindh and Punjab. Corruption is rampant across the country. All this affects the generally unprotected Christian minority in Pakistan. Jurisdiction over the federally administered tribal areas (FATA) is limited and distorted. This volatile region bordering Afghanistan is still ruled according to a colonial law called "Frontiers Crime Regulation" dating back to 1901, which effectively bans intervention from police and courts and adds to the local peoples' alienation. In this region, Pakistan's constitution seems to be

⁵⁰ See:

https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2016/04/4420694?utm_source=Newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_content=Pakistan+court+grants+bail+to+chief+suspect+in+oven+killings+of+Christian+couple&utm_campaign=Pakistan+court+grants+bail+to+chief+suspect+in+oven+killings, last accessed 29 November 2016.

⁵¹ See: <http://www.ucanews.com/news/death-sentences-for-men-who-killed-pakistani-christian-couple/77713>, last accessed 29 November 2016.

effectively abrogated. This is also shown by a report from June 2016, according to which the government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa is [giving funds](#)⁵² to a seminary widely known as the “University of Jihad”.

Dictatorial paranoia:

Pakistani politics have always shown a mixture of *Islamic oppression* and *Dictatorial paranoia*. Every government has had to struggle with opposition, radical groups, a strong independent army and corruption charges; as a result they try everything possible to hold on to power. This was shown in the WWL 2018 reporting period once more. With the ouster of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif at the end of July 2017 on corruption charges, general elections will have to take place in 2018 and the situation looks like it will become volatile again. Imran Khan (Chairman of the opposition PTI party) filed a case against Prime Minister Sharif because of the Panama leaks pointing to irregularities in the prime minister’s personal financial affairs. This revelation has already made many of those campaigning for government reforms join up with the radical Islamic agenda seeking a greater Islamization of the country. If Imran Khan will now play a larger role in national politics, this does not bode well for the country’s minorities since he has made it clear in many statements that they are not important to him.

Drivers of persecution

Drivers of persecution in Pakistan	
Government officials at any level from local to national	Very Strong
Ethnic group leaders	Strong
Non-Christian religious leaders at any level from local to national	Very Strong
Christian religious leaders at any level from local to national	Medium
Violent religious groups	Very Strong
Ideological pressure groups	Strong
Normal citizens (people from the general public), including mobs	Strong
Own (extended) family	Very Strong
Political parties at any level from local to national	Very Strong
Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups	Very Strong
Organized crime cartels or networks	Strong

⁵² See: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/06/22/pakistans-university-of-jihad-is-getting-millions-of-dollars-from-the-government/>, last accessed 29 November 2016.

Multilateral organizations (e.g. UN) and embassies	Strong
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In Pakistan, radical Islamic groups do not just exist, they flourish and expand because some of them are courted by political parties, the army and the government. Especially the army continues to follow a policy of distinguishing between good Taliban and bad Taliban, which is widely followed by the government. As long as this does not change, radical Islamic groups will continue to take to the streets, they will run thousands of madrassas (with no state authority knowing exactly what they are teaching or how they are financed) and they will be able to stir up citizens all across the country, especially youths, encouraging them to act against religious minorities, including Christians. Christians with a Muslim background are facing these hostile forces as well, but for them, their own families are the greatest danger since leaving Islam brings great shame to both family and community.

Ethnic leaders demand uncompromising obedience, so every deviation to another religion is seen as treason. Many Christians are prone to exploitation as they are poor and bonded labor is a fate that is reality for many of them, bringing their masters great profit. Ideological pressure groups, frequently connected with political parties and Islamic religious groups, exercise enormous pressure and influence, most recently shown in November 2017, when a small group managed to oust Pakistan’s minister of justice (see “Future outlook”). Multilateral organizations tend to follow the country’s discriminatory way of hiring staff, thus neglecting Pakistan’s religious minorities. Christian leaders tend to be protective of their flock, trying to hinder believers from switching churches, whatever the reason.

Context

During the WWL 2018 reporting period, Pakistan has continued to be a very volatile country. Although the army continued its campaign against Islamic militants, it also continued its policy of distinguishing between “good” and “bad” jihadists. While it fights the latter, it courts the former (eg. *Lashkar-e-Toiba*, now *Jamaat-ud-Dawah*, and the *Haqqani* network) and uses these groups as a means of active intervention in neighboring countries such as Afghanistan and India. This is the policy the army has been following for decades. The army does act against insurgents adhering to Islamic State (IS), however, whose presence is reportedly growing in Pakistan. The Taliban are still alive and carrying out attacks, but IS made inroads as well, as was shown at Easter 2017 in Lahore, when a bombing against churches was only foiled by the alertness of security forces. The leader of two banned radical Islamic groups, Hafeez Muhammad Saeed, has [launched a political party](#)⁵³ and aims to participate in the 2018 elections. However, the Milli Muslim League (MML) has yet to be recognized as a legitimate political party by Pakistan’s election commission. Whether Taliban groups are categorized as good, bad or patriotic, the result remains the same. These are all radical and violent groups which the army and/or the government are working with, and this can only result in more violence - especially against religious minorities.

⁵³ See: https://jamestown.org/program/pakistans-jamaat-ud-dawa-positions-politics/?mc_cid=c8d940d141&mc_eid=800570433e, last accessed 27 November 2017.

Mumtaz Qadri, the murderer of Salman Taseer, Muslim governor of Punjab, who had been assassinated in 2011 for his public stand against Pakistan’s blasphemy laws, was hanged on 29 February 2016. Protestors were demanding the immediate execution of all imprisoned blasphemy offenders, especially the Catholic Christian Asia Bibi. They now turned Qadri’s grave into a shrine, which is reportedly [very popular](#)⁵⁴ and visited by masses.

One of the main challenges the country faces remain the uncontrolled madrassas. A never-ending stream of madrassa-educated youth enters society. If madrassa teaching fails to be controlled, radical ideas will be planted in the younger generation’s minds. One huge topic for Pakistan’s future is therefore the control of these madrassas. An estimated 35,000 madrassas exist in the country, from which at least 11,000 follow conservative Deobandi Islam. Children and youth receive radical teaching and teachers instil hatred towards minorities. Many madrassas receive foreign funds from Middle Eastern states like Qatar, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. As even the listing and mapping of madrassas (let alone monitoring or regulating them) is seen as acting against Islam, the authorities in many cases do not know what is going on within the four walls of such buildings and hence hate-speech often goes unrecorded. However, the authorities have started to act against madrassas they deem as too radical. According to official statistics, the authorities did [shut down](#)⁵⁵ more than 2,300 madrassas and registered the locations of all madrassas in the provinces Sindh and Punjab. But there is still a long way to go.

Other religious minorities like Hindus suffer from this radicalization and persecution as well. Even Muslim minority groups like Ahmadi or Shia suffer from violent persecution since they are not regarded as being true Muslims, but rather as deviating sects. For example: In February 2017 an attack on a Sufi shrine in Sindh province claimed 75 lives. Alleged atheists can become targets of the country’s blasphemy laws very fast as well, as was shown when a university student in the city of Mardan [was lynched](#)⁵⁶ by an enraged mob in April 2017.

Besides Christians, other religious minorities have also been victims of the blasphemy laws or attacks. The Hindu minority suffers at the hands of radical Sunni militants as do Islamic minorities like Ahmadis, Shiites and Sufis.

Christian communities and how they are affected

Communities of expatriate Christians:

As expatriate Christians in Pakistan have joined the other categories listed below, they are not counted as belonging to a separate WWL-category of their own.

⁵⁴ See: <https://www.dawn.com/news/1302289>, 27 December 2016, last accessed 25 August 2017.

⁵⁵ See: <https://www.geo.tv/latest/131542>, 18 February 2017, last accessed 25 August 2017.

⁵⁶ See: <https://www.dawn.com/news/1327118/of-indifference-and-empathy>, 15 April 2017, last accessed 25 August 2017.

Historical Christian communities:

The Roman Catholic Church and Anglican Church are examples. They increasingly face hostilities and experience difficulties in getting permits for certain meetings. They are still able to function as Church but have to put up with strong control and monitoring.

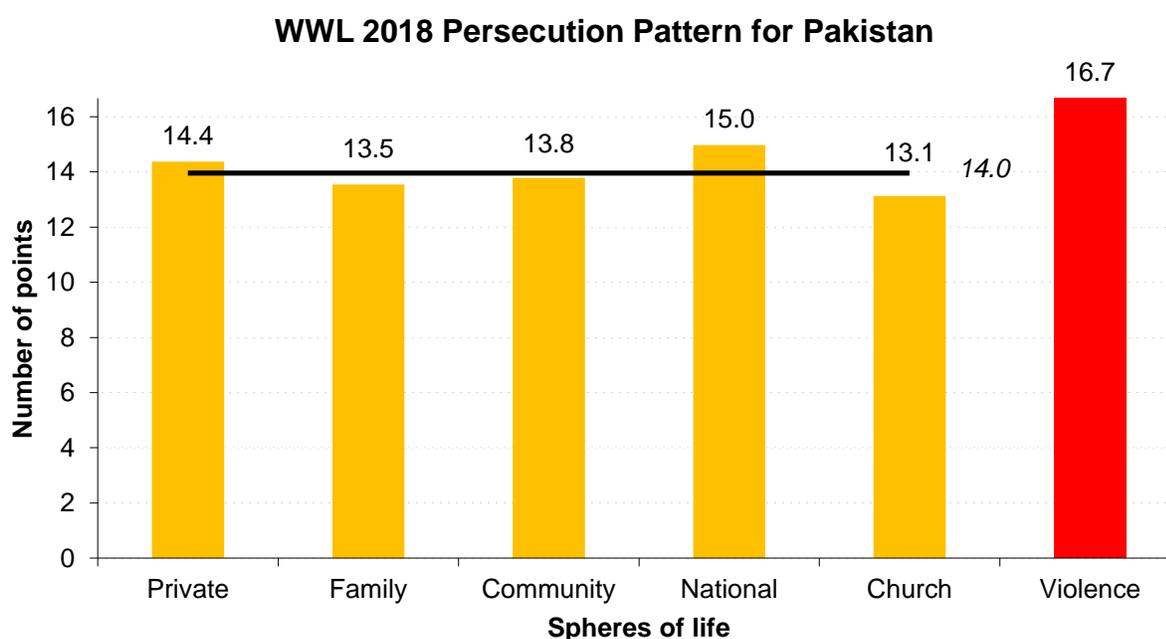
Communities of converts to Christianity:

Christians with a Muslim background suffer the brunt of persecution both from radical Islamic groups (who see them as apostates) and from families, friends and neighbors who see conversion as a shameful act of betrayal for family and community.

Non-traditional Christian communities:

Evangelical, Baptist and Pentecostal groups have come under closer scrutiny and are frequently harassed and attacked, especially when they are active in outreach among Muslims.

Pressure in the 5 spheres of life and violence



(The maximum score for each block is 16.7)

The Persecution pattern shows:

- Overall, pressure remains very high (and in some *Spheres of life*: extreme) for Christians in Pakistan. However, the average pressure decreased from 14.2 in WWL 2017 to 14.0.
- Pressure remained the same in the *National sphere* (extreme level) and *Church sphere* (very high level), reflecting among other things the continuing suffering Christians experience from the country's blasphemy laws). Pressure remains at an extreme level in the *Private* and *Community*

spheres, but is just lower than in WWL 2017. Converts are facing the strongest pressure, while for Christians in general being second-class, neglected and attacked is also a common occurrence.

- Violence against Christians reached the maximum level of 16.7 as in WWL 2017 and WWL 2016. This is remarkable since - unlike in previous WWL reporting periods - there have been no major church bombings. However, there have been many attacks against Christians: killings, abduction of women, rape, forced marriages, evictions from homes and displacements in-country and abroad.

Private sphere:

Converts from Islam always have to be very careful in the way they worship, especially if they are the only Christians in their family. Bibles and other Christian materials can be taken away by family, friends or neighbors. A case of blasphemy was brought against a boy who “liked” a cartoon on Facebook depicting a story about Islam’s founder. Social media posts are becoming increasingly dangerous for Christians to participate in. Reports of Christians being spat at and targeted aggressively in the streets, in traffic or at the work-place because of a cross being worn, are indicators that the situation is becoming more difficult. Even cars bearing stickers with crosses are more likely to be stopped by police. While house-arrest by families is another form of punishment for privately conducting worship, a milder form is for Christian converts to be put under surveillance. Converts sometimes have to go into hiding as well.

Family sphere:

Registering one’s conversion to the Christian faith is not possible. A child will be automatically registered as “Muslim” if his or her father was registered as “Muslim”, no matter if in reality the religious affiliation has changed. Once converts are discovered, they face the threat of divorce (if married) and are likely to lose their inheritance rights. Organizing a baptism, Christian wedding or funeral can become difficult or even impossible. From the moment a convert from Islam decides to be baptized, he or she is put under particular pressure since baptism is seen as the ultimate form of rejecting Islam. Even if it is a Pakistani of Christian background getting baptized, there will often be guns firing from roofs and aggressive shouting against Christians, even though it is not a crime for a Pakistani of Christian background to be baptized. Baptism is simply hated as it is a visible sign of the Christian presence growing. In small townships and remote villages, all Christian families are forced to make their children attend Islamic teaching at the local madrassa while Christian teaching is restricted to the Sunday service once a week. The majority of Christian children face pressure to “come back” to Islam at an early age, therefore parents try to prevent their children from speaking or sharing about their faith with non-Christian peers. Pastors, who are ready to baptize converts, have also been questioned and threatened on many occasions. At school, Christian children are often not allowed to use the same water fountain as their classmates as they will “defile” the water source, and they are often bullied. Schoolbooks are teaching hatred against Christians. Christians with a Muslim background face either being physically attacked and discriminated against by the Islamic community and their own family, or they may be placed under a curse through black magic, potions, amulets and other occult practices.

Community sphere:

Christians are associated with being unclean and so their use of shared facilities is thought to defile Muslims. This is how the Asia Bibi case started. In work places, the pressure against the Christian minority is often so great that Christians are forced to change their jobs multiple times to avoid being made to convert to Islam. Christians are frequently forced to do menial work like sweeping or carrying water. And even access to these jobs gets more and more restricted as reports show that new cleaning companies in the country are increasingly hiring only Muslims. Many hospitals, pharmacies and other facilities have welfare schemes, which are being increasingly denied to Christians. Christians are also often told to pay exorbitant amounts for health care. Such costs are unpayable and hence block access to medical treatment. In a horrific reflection of how Christians are discriminated against, a Christian sewage sweeper recently died when doctors refused to treat him as he was Christian and filthy with dirt. In government hospitals, Christians are not allowed to have access to the free medicines which have been supplied through *Zakat* funding. Often people in wards in hospitals do not like to share with Christians, so Christians must wait in hallways and corridors.

At school, Christian children are regularly forced to participate in Islamic practices and events. They are also under constant pressure to convert to Islam, and parents are often visited to pressure them into sending their children to Islamic events and teaching them Arabic on the pretense of bettering their grades. This confuses children and makes them vulnerable to “involuntary” conversion.

National sphere:

Pakistan is an Islamic Republic and the more recent process of Islamization started in the 1980s, when General Zia introduced the infamous laws on blasphemy in 1986. Blasphemy soon became one of the main issues the Christian minority had to face. According to a press report from 2010 (more recent data is not available), 801 of the 1,031 people imprisoned under blasphemy laws were Muslims (the vast majority of cases most likely affecting Islamic minorities). Of the remaining 230 prisoners, 162 were Christians (70.4%), 15 were Sikh (6.5%), 28 were Buddhist (12.2%), while 25 adhered to other religions.

The blasphemy laws are well known for being used for settling personal scores, making personal gains or for satisfying grudges one neighbor may have against another. They were brought back to the attention of the international community when a Christian woman, known as Asia Bibi, was accused of blasphemy and sentenced to death in 2010. She was the first woman to be on death row in Pakistan. As the blasphemy laws continue to gain prominence, it becomes increasingly difficult for courts and government to deal with them as they are highly politicized and have symbolic significance for militant Islamic groups across the country.

In the WWL 2018 reporting period, the Greater Hyderabad municipal corporation advertised vacancies for sanitary workers in which they invited applications only from non-Muslims and a further condition has been added in the application form, that they must take a religious oath on their religious holy book - Gita (700 verse Hindu scripture in Sanskrit) or Bible – that they will never do anything else but work as a sanitary worker and will never refuse to carry out the work.

Church sphere:

The NGO law introduced on 1 October 2015 allows the government to monitor and close down NGOs at their wish. Any church not registered as an NGO is immediately considered illegal and faces the threat of being closed down. The law was introduced to protect the country against terrorist organizations in the guise of charities. Hence, churches are now listed alongside terrorist organizations. Church activities are regularly watched. Security is provided for many churches by the authorities, but these very security personnel make regular reports, listen, observe and watch in detail what is going on in the church. The reports are a form of intelligence and it is suspected that they are being passed on to radical organizations and militants too. Cases have been reported in the past of security personnel turning militant, attacking local priests and pastors and threatening them. Church buildings frequently resemble fortresses with high walls and narrow gates. Despite the fact that the state has promised to protect churches with guards, there have nevertheless been several church attacks with dozens of victims.

Churches require registration and permission to proceed with new building projects. This is a long process as churches often have to wait for more than ten years to receive registration and get discouraged from proceeding with their building plans. There is high demand for bribes, and letters from influential members of parliament and governing bodies are needed. While there is no law against the building of churches as such, the process is made hard in order to discourage Christians.

While the pressure against churches reaching out to youth increases, there have been no reported cases of outright obstruction. However, pastors and Christian workers have received warnings that their activities are being watched by the authorities and pressure groups in the neighborhood. Apart from the Bible Society of Pakistan, all other Christian organizations are strongly discouraged from owning printing presses. Also, the work of the Bible Society is closely monitored and each Bible has a serial number that can be tracked. In October 2016, eleven Christian TV channels of the thirteen available in the country were de-registered. Christians are also worried about a law on internet restrictions, [passed in August 2016](#)⁵⁷, which has the potential to limit one of the last available ways of spreading the Christian message. In the WWL 2018 reporting period, there was a heated debate on Christian family law. Christians are being encouraged/compelled to allow divorce in more cases than purely on grounds of adultery.

Violence:

Christian rickshaw driver Shahzad Masi was killed on 8 February 2017. Noman Munir Masih was killed on 20 March 2017. On 30 August 2017, 17 year old student Sharoon Masih was [beaten to death](#)⁵⁸ by his fellow students after allegedly having taken a drink from the same water source that Muslim students used. But possibly the best illustration how Christians are frequently treated happened during Ramadan, on 2 June 2017, when Christian sanitary worker Irfan Masih was brought to a hospital in Umerkot, Sindh province after having inhaled toxic fumes while cleaning a foul water pipe. Doctors refused to touch his unclean

⁵⁷ See: <http://www.ucanews.com/news/internet-restrictions-a-further-blow-to-church-mission-in-pakistan/77686>, last accessed 29 November 2016.

⁵⁸ See: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2017/09/pakistani-17-targeted-teacher-students-dies-beating-second-day-high-school/>, last accessed 28 September 2017.

body and so he [died](#)⁵⁹ as a result. Another new development was the [killing of two Chinese Christians](#)⁶⁰ working in Pakistan: 24 year-old Li Xinheng and 26 year-old Meng Lisi. They were killed by radicals connected to the Islamic State group which accused them of proselytizing.

Attacks on churches are taking place with a sickening frequency, although the buildings are not always destroyed or have to be closed. However, according to interviews with many pastors, there have been frequent fires, broken windows, damaged property and minor harassments such as power-cuts and water restrictions targeting churches. This overt violence conceals the daily violence behind the scenes against Christian girls and women who are often abducted, raped and forcefully married and converted. In blasphemy cases, the homes of Christians are frequently attacked, forcing them and their families to go into hiding. Pakistan is the only country in WWL 2018 with a maximum score for violence.

Gender profile of persecution

Female:

Horrific statistics continue to indicate that an estimated 700 Pakistani Christian girls and women are abducted each year, often raped and then forcefully married to Muslim men from the community. This involves forced conversions as well, and if a Christian family is bold enough to challenge the abduction and marriage, they often face accusations of harassing the “voluntarily converted” girl and her new family.

Male:

No data available.

Future outlook

The main challenge for Pakistan is the question of how to deal with militant Islamic groups. The immediate hope after the attack on the Peshawar Army School in December 2014 was that the army would withdraw protection from certain militant groups. This hope has not been fulfilled. The army and government are still trying to distinguish between “good” and “bad” jihadi groups, and it is the religious minorities - including Christians – who continue to pay the price for this approach. The August 2017 decision by the US government to increase the number of troops in Afghanistan and the connected stern warning to Pakistan (as a major ally) not to support radical Islamic movements, will most likely change nothing. The influence of even relatively small radical Islamic groups was shown once more in November 2017, when a group of 3,000 people managed to [block a major intersection](#)⁶¹ of Islamabad, effectively stopping traffic in the

⁵⁹ See: <https://www.ucanews.com/news/calls-for-justice-as-christian-sanitary-worker-dies/79439>, last accessed 27 November 2017.

⁶⁰ See: https://www.chinasource.org/blog/posts/mourning-two-chinese-christians-killed-in-pakistan?utm_medium=feed&utm_source=feedpress.me&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+chinesechurchvoices, last accessed 27 November 2017.

⁶¹ See: https://www.apnews.com/d0d2ecd82dc9465bb3b8ddbe29bf24b4/Islamists-rally-near-Islamabad,-demand-removal-of-minister?utm_source=Pew+Research+Center&utm_campaign=0cd2547588-

whole capital, demanding the removal of a minister and the strict implementation of the blasphemy laws. End of November 2017, their demands were partly given in to, as the [justice minister resigned](#).⁶²

The political stability improved in the last two election cycles, just in time for the country's 70th birthday in August 2017. This changed with the ouster of Prime Minister Sharif mentioned under "Dictatorial Paranoia" above. Another important source of unrest could be the publication of the country's most recent census results. The authenticity of the very first and long-awaited statistics have already been [challenged](#)⁶³ by opposition politicians and certain province authorities. The fact that Pakistan's total population of well over 200 million has increased by 60% since the last census in 1998 and [continues to grow](#)⁶⁴ at a rate of 2% annually, shows what challenges Pakistan is facing. If this rate continues, the country's population could double again over the next decades. The fact that the statistics for religious affiliation have not yet been released shows how sensitive these numbers are; they could support religious minorities in their [fight for political representation](#).⁶⁵

Another question the country has struggled with for several years now is how to effectively limit the infamous blasphemy laws, and how this could be done without provoking an aggressive reaction from radical Islamic groups. All efforts so far have remained unsuccessful and were answered with strong opposition. In August 2017, a High Court judge proposed to make Pakistan's notorious blasphemy laws tougher in the sense that wrong accusations should be punished as harshly as blasphemers. All hopes for changes to this law have so far been premature. On 14 September 2017, a court in Gujrat sentenced Christian Nadeem Masih [to death](#)⁶⁶ because he had allegedly sent four blasphemous messages via WhatsApp, making him the first victim of alleged online blasphemy in Pakistan and reflecting the dangerous situation especially religious minorities find themselves in.

Another challenge the country has to face is how it is going to deal with its struggling neighbor Afghanistan. Reports emerged in June 2016 that Pakistan plans to send back an estimated three million refugees to Afghanistan. This would multiply problems in Afghanistan, increase the appeal of militant groups to those with no perspective (and add to competition between rival groups) and have repercussions for Pakistan itself. However, until now, Pakistan has "only" sent back 600,000 refugees, causing enough problems already for its weak neighbor.

Competition between the Taliban and IS increases the pressure on both groups to recruit followers. Their recruitment strategy requires each group to appear closer to the heart of Islam than the other. In their efforts to appear more Islamic, one strategy has been to attack the "dhimmi" as they are most vulnerable

[EMAIL CAMPAIGN 2017 11 10&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_3e953b9b70-0cd2547588-399904105](#), last accessed 27 November 2017.

⁶² See: <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Islamabad,-Islamic-protesters'-victory:-Justice-Minister-resigns-42428.html>, last accessed 27 November 2017.

⁶³ See: <https://www.dawn.com/news/1354150/opposition-parties-suspicious-of-census-results>, last accessed 28 September 2017.

⁶⁴ See: <http://thediplomat.com/2017/09/pakistans-new-big-threat-a-bulging-population/>, last accessed 28 September 2017.

⁶⁵ See: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2017/11/what-makes-pakistans-small-religious-minorities-so-significant/>, last accessed 27 November 2017.

⁶⁶ See: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2017/09/pakistan-christian-sentenced-death-whatsapp-blasphemy-despite-gaps-police-case/>, 20 September 2017, last accessed 28 September 2017.

to the ideology of “pure Islam”. Striving for a stronger Islamic identity (as carried out by the radical Islamic groups) therefore includes persecuting Christians more and taking away as many of their rights as possible at a time when the government is not particularly interested in granting rights to minorities. This in turn fits well into the wider society’s negative attitude towards Christians: Islamic oppression will most likely remain strong in Pakistan.

Policy considerations

- In line with its commitments under the ICCPR⁶⁷, the government of Pakistan should repeal the 1986 blasphemy laws which are broadly and vaguely defined, used largely to imprison religious minorities, and are frequently applied on the basis of false accusations. The government should protect the judges dealing with blasphemy cases and guarantee a fair trial.
- Asia Bibi is still on death-row. The international community should request the immediate release of Asia Bibi and others from religious minorities imprisoned under the blasphemy laws.
- The government of Pakistan should respond to the questions of the UN Human Rights Committee on Pakistan’s human rights with a concrete plan on the blasphemy laws, honor killings, and physical and sexual attacks on religious minorities which are often used for forcible conversion.
- The UN and international community should urge the government of Pakistan to grant and implement protection and rights for girls and women of religious minorities.
- The government of Pakistan should expand the National Action Plan to Combat Terrorism to include the promotion of rights for religious minorities and interfaith participation in education, business and politics as the prerequisite for peace and stability.
- Given the frequency of violent incidents at family and local community level against Christians, the government should develop measures to fully investigate attacks and end impunity.
- Given the frequency of threats, reported attacks and the fear that Christians undergo, the government should end its silence on such incidents, accept that they are happening and seek ways of changing the mind-set of those who initiate such actions.

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²⁰ ICCPR = The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights - an international human rights treaty adopted by the United Nations in 1966.

6. Eritrea

Reporting period: 1 November 2016 - 31 October 2017

Position on the World Watch List (WWL)

WWL 2018 Points: 86 / Position: 6

WWL 2017 Points: 82 / Position: 10

WWL 2016 Points: 89 / Position: 3

With a score of 86 points, Eritrea reaches rank 6 on WWL 2018, which is a rise of 4 points compared to WWL 2017. This was mainly due to an increase of over 4 points in the score for violent incidents. Government security forces conducted many raids that targeted Christians. Christian materials were taken and some house churches were also damaged in the process. Hundreds of Christians were taken to detention centers. A Christian mother also died in detention. More than ten Christians leaders are still languishing in government prisons under atrocious conditions. It is reported that there are thousands of prisoners of conscience in Eritrean prisons and Christians are among them.

Persecution engines

Persecution engines ⁶⁸	
Islamic oppression	strong
Religious nationalism	Not at all
Ethnic antagonism	weak
Denominational protectionism	Very Strong
Communist and post-Communist oppression	Not at all
Secular intolerance	Not at all
Dictatorial paranoia	Very strong
Organized corruption and crime	strong

Denominational protectionism (Very strong):

The Eritrean Orthodox Church has a long historical presence in the country and sometimes puts pressure on Christians with a different background. This pressure partly originates from theological differences but has practical roots as well. Well organized and with a long tradition, the Orthodox Church looks down upon other types of Christianity as being newcomers. For the Orthodox Church leaders, Eritrea is the home of the Orthodox Church, its Christian history is defined by the Orthodox Church, and other denominations – in particular the Pentecostal groups - are not regarded as legitimate. One country researcher says: “There is a serious reservation by Orthodox Christians to accept followers of other forms of Christianity as Christians. And such reservation manifests itself in different forms at different parts of the country. While

⁶⁸ The scale for the level of influence of Persecution engines and Drivers in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong.

the reasons for such actions could be mainly [theological differences], the fear of losing the dominant role the Orthodox Church in the way of life of citizens of the country for centuries plays a huge role.”

Dictatorial paranoia (Very strong):

Eritrea became an independent nation following the 1993 referendum. Since 1993, the People’s Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) has been exercising full control over Eritrea, under the leadership of President Afewerki. The regime has become synonymous with absolute authoritarianism and is doing everything possible to maintain its power: It has arrested, harassed and killed Christians because they are considered to be agents of the West and hence a threat to the state and the government. Sources from inside the country are suggesting that the president is grooming his son to replace him. One country expert says: “After decades of bloody war for independence which is responsible for the loss of tens of thousands of lives and bodily and physiological injury for thousand others, the last thing that was expected of the current ruling party was another oppressive government. However, the current ruling party, in clear disregard of its promises during the armed struggle, formed an absolute authoritarian regime wherein any form of dissent in any form is not tolerated. The number one goal of the ruling party is staying in power at any cost.” It is in this context that the government is persecuting Christians.

Islamic oppression (Strong):

Approximately half of the Eritrean population is Muslim. Since most Muslims reside in the lowlands along the Red Sea Coast and the border with Sudan, Eritrean Muslims are showing a tendency towards radicalism, partly due to what is going on in the region. This means that Christians living in those areas are particularly vulnerable, especially converts from Islam. Eritrean Muslims are “Muslims first” and “Eritrean second”. Conversion to Christianity is seen as a betrayal of community, family and Islamic faith. One country expert states: “This engine is not as strong in the highlands of the country compared to the remote parts of the country where the majority of the population is Muslim. Despite the desire of such extremist groups to form an Islamic state, the fact that the government is not willing to tolerate such form of groups which are considered as a challenge to its power, has played a major role in preventing the spread of their extremist ideas. However, it does not mean that such extremist groups are not a danger to the way of life of Christians especially those living in the lowlands of the country. Christians cannot freely exercise their religion as they wish and getting schools for their kids free from influence of teaching of the above mentioned extremist groups is not easy.”

Organized Corruption and Crime (Strong):

Eritrea is one of the most corrupt countries in the world. According to a report released in January 2017 by Transparency International, Eritrea ranks 164 out of 176 countries.⁶⁹ This mainly involves the army which controls so many aspects of life in the country. An expert said: “The military is the strongest amongst all sectors of the government, and abuse of power and corruption are rampant at different levels. One good example in this regard is the bribe that Christians are asked to pay if they got caught while trying to escape the country. Failure to pay such bribes could lead to arbitrary detention or death.”

⁶⁹ See https://www.transparency.org/news/feature/corruption_perceptions_index_2016, last accessed 7 December 2017.

Drivers of persecution

DRIVERS OF PERSECUTION IN ERITREA	
Government officials at any level from local to national	Very Strong
Ethnic group leaders	Weak
Non-Christian religious leaders at any level from local to national	Strong
Christian religious leaders at any level from local to national	Very strong
Violent religious groups	Not at all
Ideological pressure groups	Not at all
Normal citizens (people from the general public), including mobs	Strong
Own (extended) family	Strong
Political parties at any level from local to national	Very strong
Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups	Not at all
Organized crime cartels or networks	Strong
Multilateral organizations (e.g. UN) and embassies	Not at all

One of the main drivers of persecution in Eritrea are government officials. They constantly harass and arrest Christians, especially the ones that are not recognized by the government. The Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOC) is another driver that is behind persecution. The EOC is the oldest Christian community in the country and has the most number of Christian followers. It exerts a huge influence in many aspects of life. The problem with such influence is that the church does not welcome new forms of Christianity in the country, above all the Pentecostal churches. And there is no denial that the leaders of the Orthodox Church actively support efforts to limit the expansion of other Christian churches. Muslim religious leaders have also played an important role in creating anti-Christian sentiment among their followers which has in turn resulted in the persecution of Christians. Family members and community leaders are also drivers of persecution, especially when it comes to converts. The ruling People's Front for Democracy and Justice party (PFDJ) is also another driver that is behind many challenges that Christians in the country face. This is coupled by the existence of networks of corruption within the army and the ruling party that has made life for many Eritreans (especially Christians) very difficult; there is nowhere for them to appeal to for their rights to be respected.

Context

Dubbed the “North Korea of Africa,” Eritrea ranks among the very worst countries in terms of freedom of religion, freedom of press, rule of law and other human rights records. Eritrea entered the World Watch List in 2002, and in 2004 the country jumped into the top 20 and in WWL 2016 ranked 3rd. The Eritrean regime is absolutely authoritarian and intolerant towards any form of unregistered organization, dissent, and free expression. There is no safe place in the country – as is confirmed by the large number of Eritrean refugees in Europe and elsewhere. The fact that those who are oppressed are fleeing the country is an advantage for the government, since some of those fleeing could be among the ones who would otherwise

have been pressing the government for changes and reforms. It is also financially advantageous for the government since Eritreans abroad are required to pay an expatriate tax.

According to Reporters Without Borders reporting in April 2016, 11 Eritrean journalists were known to be in prison without trial: “Eritrea systematically violates freedom of expression and information. It is Africa’s biggest prison for journalists.”⁷⁰ The president of the country is on the Reporters Without Borders’ list of “Predators of Press Freedom.”⁷¹ And the Press Freedom Index ranked the country lowest for the past eight years - even below Somalia, Sudan, China and Iran.

The Eritrean government has made it clear that only officially recognized religions can operate in the country, namely: Sunni Islam, the Eritrean Orthodox Church, Roman Catholics and Lutherans. For other Christian denominations it is very difficult to function in the country and as a result they have to face the brunt of the persecution. The introduction of a registration system in 1997 completely outlawed a large category of Christians. Except for the recognized religious institutions named above all other groups were asked to apply for registration. At some point those who applied were labeled as compliant, but no licenses were issued. The government’s attempt to control all religious institutions culminated in the deposing of the Eritrean Orthodox Church Patriarch in 2007 who has been under house-arrest ever since.

Government abuse and the hardships suffered led to dissatisfaction amongst the population and it eventually resulted in an attempted coup in 2013. It failed and, putting all the blame on the West and Ethiopia, the government now had another excuse to intensify its persecution of Christians, named by the government as “agents of the West”. The incident also gave a chance for Muslims to get closer to the government on the basis of “my enemy is your enemy”.

Eritrea has also been consistently accused of supporting the rise and spread of radical Islamic militants in the Horn of Africa, mainly to gain political advantage. The UN sanctions against Eritrea for this support – for arming al-Shabaab in particular - implies that the Eritrean government is also an accomplice in the persecution of Christians outside Eritrea by supplying the means and methods of persecution to jihadist groups. In addition, the Eritrean government has close ties with the Islamic government of Sudan and is close to countries of the Middle East like Qatar, Iran and Saudi Arabia in terms of culture, policy and geography, where Christians are facing constant opposition. Many Christians are leaving the country via neighboring countries - Sudan, Ethiopia, and Egypt - and have become easy prey for human traffickers, especially in the Sinai desert. Some of them were caught and beheaded in Libya by Islamic State in 2015, but thousands have made it to Europe across the Mediterranean Sea.

Eritrea is one of two African countries re-designated as a “Country of Particular Concern” (CPC) by the US State Department on 31 October 2016 due to severe violations of freedom of religion.⁷² Robert P. George (Chairman of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom) and Thomas J. Reese (USCIRF Commissioner) suggested that “Eritrea’s track record on human rights crimes and religious freedom warrant a referral to the International Criminal Court (ICC) at The Hague.” A Commission of Inquiry set up

⁷⁰ See: <https://rsf.org/en/news/rsf-appears-african-commission-human-and-peoples-rights>, last accessed 14 September 2017.

⁷¹ See: https://gallery.mailchimp.com/5cb8824c726d51483ba41891e/files/Predator_of_press_freedom.02.pdf.

⁷² See: <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/irf/c13003.htm>, last accessed 8 December 2016.

by the UN Human Rights Commission also suggested that the Eritrean regime should be referred to the ICC.⁷³ The government suspects that the report by the Commission of Inquiry would not have been possible without cooperation from people inside Eritrea.

In addition to Christians (especially from those denominations that are not recognized by the government), other religious minorities also face challenges, for instance Muslims who oppose the government and Jehovah's Witnesses.

Christian communities and how they are affected

All four WWL categories of Christianity are present in Eritrea. The different types of Christians face varying levels and forms of persecution.

Communities of expatriate Christians:

The number of expatriates is significantly declining due to the government's pressure. This group of Christians experience difficulties in traveling in the country and meeting with other Christians.

Historical Christian communities:

This is the biggest group in the country and includes the Eritrean Orthodox Church, Anglicans, Lutherans, and Roman Catholics. These Christians live mainly in the Christian-dominated areas of central and southern Eritrea. They are affected by *Islamic oppression* and also face persecution from the government.

Communities of converts to Christianity:

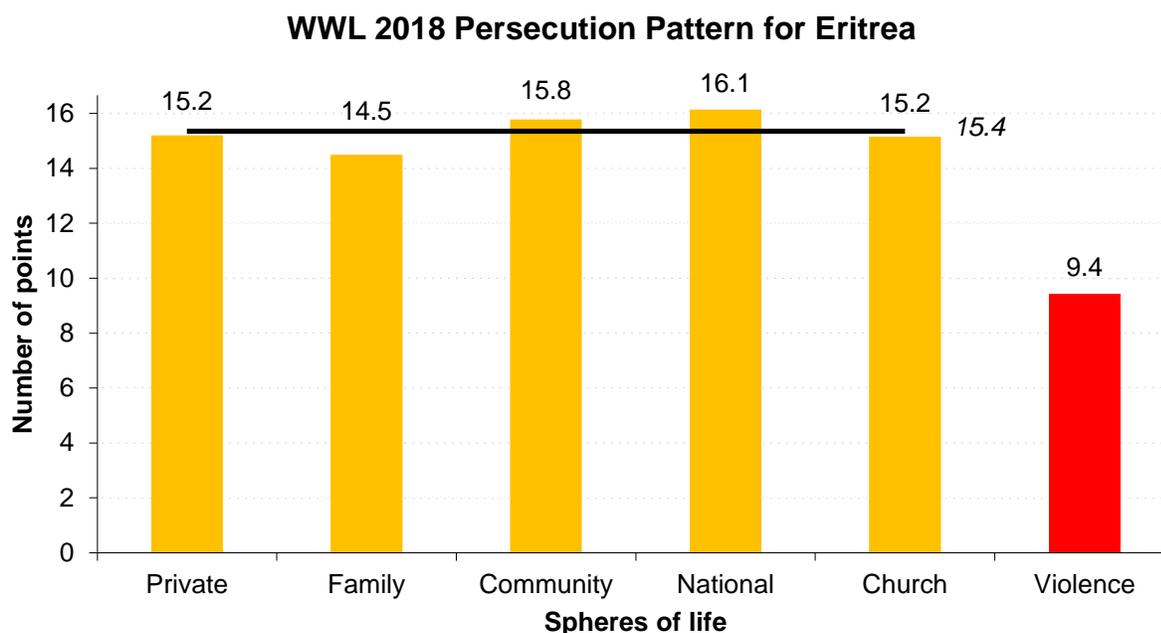
This group refers either to Christians who have left the historical Christian communities (especially the Orthodox Church) to join non-traditional congregations or to Muslims who have converted to Christianity. The first category can face serious persecution from the Eritrean Orthodox Church, the latter from Muslim families and society.

Non-traditional Christian communities:

This group faces the harshest persecution in the country. Baptist, Evangelical and Pentecostal congregations are seen as agents of the West. The Pentecostal communities in particular face serious persecution especially from government officials and the Eritrean Orthodox Church.

⁷³ See: <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=20779&LangID=E>, last accessed 8 December 2016.

Pressure in the 5 spheres of life and violence



(The maximum score for each block is 16.7)

The Persecution pattern shows:

- The average pressure on Christians in Eritrea is 15.4 compared to 15.3 in WWL 2017.
- Pressure is at an extreme level in all *Spheres of life* and strongest in the *National sphere* (16.1), which is an indication that government policy is mainly responsible for the persecution of Christian in the country.
- The score for violence rose from 5.0 in WWL 2017 to 9.4. This sharp rise of over 4 points is due to the increase in house raids by government security forces which resulted in the confiscation of Christians materials and sometimes damage to house-churches. Over the last years, thousands of Christians have been arrested and imprisoned and many have died as prisoners. There are still many Christians languishing in prisons because of their faith. In the WWL 2018 reporting period, one Christian mother died in detention.

Private life:

The government continuously targets individuals in their private life, making their everyday lives complicated. Many Christian homes were targeted for raids in the WWL 2018 reporting period which resulted in arrests and the confiscation of Christian materials. The restriction on freedom of religion against Christians in Eritrea goes to the extent of officials conducting house-to-house searches against anyone suspected of being a member of the so-called new forms of Christianity. The controlling nature of the ruling party seeks to monitor the daily activities of members of the minority Christian groups. Cadres and security forces of the ruling party can search any private residence without the need to get a court warrant. Underground Christians at prayer are the main targets. Private possession of basic materials for

a Christian life (e.g. the Bible, Bible dictionary, books by Christian scholars, CDs of Christian sermons, T-shirts with biblical quotes) are considered treason by the ruling party and will lead to arbitrary detention for an indefinite period without the need to get any court decision to that effect.

Family life:

For Christians, family life is under threat in Eritrea. Due to government arrests, imprisonment, and abductions, Christian families disintegrate. Some family members are forced to flee their country often leaving vulnerable family members at home. Due to *Denominational protectionism*, some Christians are also denied inheritance as well as other family-related rights. Due to *Islamic oppression*, Christians face multifaceted challenges in Muslim dominated areas. For example: Christians with a Muslim background cannot conduct a Christian wedding in public, and when they die, they are buried according to Muslim rites. When planning a wedding, the problems for followers of the so-called “new religion” start when a hall needs to be found for conducting the ceremony. Most halls are controlled by the government. Unless the wedding planners hide the fact that the wedding is for Protestants, no one will be willing to rent a hall to them for fear of repercussions from government officials. This is of course in addition to the fact that most owners of private halls are anyway unwilling to rent their hall to Protestants. Another problem is then to find a pastor willing to conduct the wedding. There have been instances where wedding couples, pastors and guests have all been detained for participating in a wedding. Non-Orthodox church leaders are risking their personal freedom whenever they conduct weddings for Christian couples. Even after getting married, the law of the land will not give legal recognition to such marriages since it is claimed that unregistered churches have no authority to hold weddings.

Community life:

The government is known to enlist the help of the community to spy on all Christian activities in their locality. This can give rise to strange alliances: e.g. Muslims monitoring Evangelical activities on behalf of the government - especially any outreach to Muslims in their communities. To operate businesses, Christians are required to produce a certificate of military service. Christians cannot get access to higher education if they are not enlisted to serve in the army. Because of the communal way of life practiced in this part of the world, it is unthinkable for the day-to-day life of a Christian not to be affected because of his religious beliefs. Fearing that they will persuade their children to become Christians too, the majority of Eritrean families will not allow their children to play with the children of converts. Such marginalization goes even to the extent of family to family relationships. The level of threat and obstruction is higher in rural areas where the level of tolerance and acceptance is very low compared to the urban areas. In most cases, converts in rural areas will not disclose their religious beliefs for fear of discrimination. It should be noted here that in some instances the level of threat against converts goes to the extent of forcing the converts to either renounce their new faith or leave the community once and for all. There have also been instances where converts have been denied access to basic needs like health care, drinking water, schools for their children because of their new faith.

National life:

Eritrea is referred to as “The North Korea of Africa” and designated a “Country of Particular Concern” by the US State Department because the country has a policy that severely restricts freedom of religion. That

is why the national sphere score is the highest. The country has made it clear that only recognized religious groups can exist and operate in the country. It is the government that appoints the Patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church and, as happened in 2007, any dissent by a religious leader can lead to removal from post and arrest. The government is known to force Christians to act against their conscience. Pursuant to Article 6 of Proclamation on National Service No. 82/1995 of 1995, any Eritrean citizen between the age of 18 and 50 has the obligation to enlist for national service. The Proclamation does not provide any exception for citizens not wanting to enlist on religious grounds. Religious groups have thus faced enormous pressure and violence for refusing to take part in or for quitting national service.

The pressure mentioned above goes hand in hand with the refusal by the state to recognize religious groups other than the four registered by the state⁷⁴. Such denial of recognition by the state is taken as a legal ground for local community leaders and local police to harass and intimidate Christians belonging to non-registered fellowships. It is very common for ruling party cadres and local police to arrest and interrogate anyone suspected of being a follower of an unregistered religious group. If the individual being interrogated is found to be a member of an unregistered religious group, he or she will in most cases be sent to one of the concentration camps located in remote corners of the country. After release from such unjust detention, the individual will be ordered to denounce his religion and also report to the local police on a weekly or monthly basis. Failure to report will lead to further detention.

Church life:

Religious groups in Eritrea must by law either register or cease operating. However, getting a registration permit is virtually impossible. Raids on underground Christian meetings are common and the government has a strong intelligence machinery. Christians from churches not recognized by the government have to constantly make sure they are not being followed. Never in the history of Eritrea since independence have members of non-traditional Christian communities been able to freely conduct prayers without the risk of getting arrested, arbitrarily detained or even killed. The government also interferes in the election of religious leaders. For example, the Eritrean Orthodox Church Patriarch, Patriarch Abune Antonios, has been under house arrest since May 2007. Furthermore, religious groups cannot print and distribute documents/materials without prior approval by the Office of Religious Affairs. Since 2002 the state authorities have not approved any registrations beyond the country's four principal religious groups: the Eritrean Orthodox Church, the Evangelical (Lutheran) Church of Eritrea, the Roman Catholic Church and Islam.

Violence:

More than 300 Christians have been arrested in the WWL 2018 reporting period. These Christians are being held by the government in miserable conditions, some in shipping containers in scorching temperatures. Thousands of Christians have been arrested and imprisoned over the years, some of whom still remain in prison after 11 years. The location of some of the detention and prison centers are Asmara police stations, Mai Sirwa, Adi Abieto, Assab, Hashferai, Barentu, Mai Idaga, and Alla. Many prisoners are

⁷⁴ It has to be noted that Compliance status was given to those groups that applied for registration – leading to some benefits initially at least in 1997 when the government ordered them to register. That benefit withered away as time went by.

forced to work very long hours in commercial flower fields. Some of the notable Christians who have been imprisoned for more than ten years are: Haile Naigzhi, leader of Eritrea’s Full Gospel Church (arrested in 2004); Kiflu Gebremeskel, founder and pastor of Southwest Full Gospel Church (arrested in 2004), Million Gebreselasie, medical doctor and pastor of Massawa Rhema Church (arrested in 2004); Tekleab Menghisteab, medical doctor and priest (arrested in 2004); Gebremedhin Gebregioris, priest (arrested in Nov 2004), Kidane Weldou pastor of the Full Gospel Church (disappeared in 2005 but believed to be in prison), and Abune Antonios Eritrean Orthodox Patriarch (under house arrest since 2007). A mother of three also died in detention in the WWL 2018 reporting period.

Gender profile of persecution

Female:

Female Christians face enormous challenges. Cross-denominational converts from the EOC as well as Christians from a Muslim background face forced marriage and forced renunciation of their new faith. Women are also subjected to obligatory military training and national service; however, men are more impacted by this.

Male:

Male Christians in the country are mainly victims of the system of obligatory military conscription. As a result, many young Eritreans seek to escape the country.⁷⁵

Future outlook

Despite protests from international human rights groups and the UN Human Rights Commission’s report on crimes against humanity perpetrated by the Eritrean government, the regime has not yet faced serious consequences for its appalling human rights record. In fact the country is trying to work out ways of reestablishing a strong relationship with Western countries. Considering past trends, the following scenario seems likely:

- Oppressed and persecuted Eritreans will continue to flee the country.
- The Eritrean government will continue its authoritarian course and regard non-traditional Christian communities as agents of the West.
- The Eritrean government will continue forcing all Eritreans to join the national army and do national service for extended periods of time without upholding the rights of conscientious objectors.
- The Eritrean Orthodox Church and radical Muslims will continue persecuting converts.
- It is unlikely that those who are in prison because of their faith will be released without them signing statements contrary to their beliefs.

⁷⁵ See <https://www.economist.com/blogs/baobab/2014/03/national-service-eritrea> last accessed 25 September 2017.

Policy Considerations

The Eritrean government has isolated itself and the people from the international community in many ways. The many condemnations have not yet brought any meaningful results. Yet it is important to continue doing so:

- The US State Department should continue designating the country as CPC.
- THE USCIRF should continue recommending the designation of the country as CPC.
- The government of Eritrea must be pressed to stop arresting, harassing and intimidating Christians.
- The government of Eritrea must be pressed to release all Christians in jail.
- The government of Eritrea should be urged to allow international observers and investigators to enter the country.

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7. Libya

Reporting period: 1 November 2016 - 31 October 2017

Position on World Watch List (WWL)

WWL 2018 Points: 86 / Position: 7

WWL 2017 Points: 78 / Position: 11

WWL 2016 Points: 79 / Position: 10

Libya rises 8 points to a score of 86 at rank 7 in the WWL 2018. The rise is directly attributable to the increase in violence against Christians, particularly in relation to transient migrants who are generally treated very badly and among whom Christians are singled out for even worse treatment. More information concerning this was available for WWL 2018. The overall state of anarchy has also continued and this contributes to the deplorable condition in which Christians in Libya are forced to exist.

Persecution engines

Persecution engines ⁷⁶	
Islamic oppression	Very strong
Religious nationalism	Not at all
Ethnic antagonism	Not at all
Denominational protectionism	Not at all

⁷⁶ The scale for the level of influence of Persecution engines and Drivers in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong.

Communist and post-Communist oppression	Not at all
Secular intolerance	Not at all
Dictatorial paranoia	Not at all
Organized corruption and crime	Medium

Islamic oppression (Very strong):

This engine manifests itself in different ways. Libya has a deeply Islamic culture in which converts from Islam to Christianity face huge pressure from their family members and community. Following Gaddafi's downfall, a variety of radical Islamic groups have a free hand in the country and have gained more influence and control over society.

Organized corruption and crime (Medium):

This is a secondary persecution engine in Libya. The fact that corruption is so rife also contributes to perpetuating the lack of rule of law and impunity in the country. This engine is blended with *Islamic oppression* since some of the Islamic militant groups work with or act as organized criminal groups by engaging in human trafficking and other criminal activities.

Drivers of persecution

Drivers of persecution in Libya	
Government officials at any level from local to national	Strong
Ethnic group leaders	Strong
Non-Christian religious leaders at any level from local to national	Very Strong
Christian religious leaders at any level from local to national	Not at all
Violent religious groups	Very Strong
Ideological pressure groups	Not at all
Normal citizens (people from the general public), including mobs	Strong
Own (extended) family	Very Strong
Political parties at any level from local to national	Medium
Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups	Very strong
Organized crime cartels or networks	Medium
Multilateral organizations (e.g. UN) and embassies	Not at all

Drivers of Islamic oppression

In Libya there are several drivers of persecution. Ordinary people who subscribe to intolerant and extreme interpretations of Islam contribute to the persecution of Christians especially in the *Private, Family and Community spheres of life*. The persecution of Christians by such people is exacerbated by a plethora of Islamist militant groups that control a considerable part of Libyan territory. Such groups are responsible for the most violent forms of persecution and act with absolute impunity due to the absence of a single government to impose any semblance of law and order in the country. Behind both drivers of persecution the teaching and influence of radical Wahhabi imams is present and hence these teachers could also be considered as drivers of persecution.

Drivers of Organized corruption and crime

Criminal groups engaged in human trafficking and kidnapping for ransom are the most notable drivers of persecution when it comes to *Organized corruption and crime*. These groups engage in all sorts of predatory behavior against immigrants who are trying to make their way through Libya to Europe. In addition to being held hostage for ransom, many are sold into slavery and many women are subjected to sexual assault and rape.

Context

Libya is currently in a state of anarchy with at least three competing governments. The ongoing civil war in Libya between several militant groups allied with three rival governments means that the country will remain a safe haven for Islamist militant groups that are working to destabilize the whole region. The continued state of anarchy makes it probable that Christians will continue to be persecuted in Libya and it also provides a base of operations for militant groups to attack Christians in neighboring countries. Unfortunately, there seems to be no end in sight for the civil war and the instability that has engulfed Libya since the Arab Spring of 2011. Although Fayeze al-Sarraj (leader of the UN-backed Government of National Accord based in Tripoli) and General Khalifa Haftar (leader of the armed forces loyal to the parliament based in eastern Libya in the city of Tobruk) have agreed on an outline of a peace deal facilitated by Italy, UAE and Egypt, there is a lot of doubt as to whether or not this deal could actually be implemented.⁷⁷

According to the UNDP Human Development Index which ranks countries based on their socio-economic status, Libya is ranked 102 out of 188 countries. Although Libya used to be one of the African countries that performed relatively better, since the Arab Spring uprisings of 2011 its overall performance in the ranking has steadily fallen as a result of a decline in the accessibility and quality of health care and education, amongst other factors. The ongoing civil war has resulted in the disruption of oil exports and the provision of social services that were state-subsidized before the conflict erupted. Huge amounts of money are being spent on armaments by the various sides in the conflict and the violence has caused widespread destruction which will take years to rebuild.

Libya has become a classic failed state and, more than half a decade since the Arab Spring, its dreams of becoming an open and democratic country have been replaced with a nightmarish scenario in which a patchwork of militant groups control different parts of the country and vie for supremacy. The situation has not shown any sign of improvement over the years and it will be difficult to see how the conflict will be resolved any time soon. In the meantime, the conflict has increased the vulnerability of Christians in the country.

Migrants intercepted attempting to reach Europe are held in 24 detention centres across Libya run by the Department to Combat Irregular Migration (DCIM) which nominally falls under the control of Libya's Ministry of Interior, but in practice many are run by members of armed groups, at whose hands people of

⁷⁷ See: <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2017/05/haftar-sarraj-meeting-libya-170511110810139.html>, last accessed 27 September 2017.

all faiths suffer. Violence, virtual slavery and sexual abuse is rife. Those detained are without protection given the lack of any national asylum law or system in Libya.⁷⁸ In the strongly Islamized context of Libya Christian migrants are particularly vulnerable.

Ibadi Muslims in Libya who do not belong to the Sunni or Shia Islamic traditions face persecution in the form of violent attacks by groups like IS and other militant Sunni groups. (Children of these radical groups are also taught using text books influenced by Wahhabism.)

Christian communities and how they are affected

Communities of expatriate Christians:

Christian migrant workers (most of them coming from sub-Saharan Africa and some from Egypt) are allowed to have their own churches, but Libyans are not allowed to attend. Under the despotic rule of Muammar Gaddafi, the situation for Christians in Libya was already extremely harsh. Expatriate or migrant Christians enjoy some freedom, but indigenous non-Arab Africans face double persecution - based on race and religion.

Historical Christian communities:

This category does not exist in Libya as defined by WWL methodology.

Communities of converts to Christianity:

The very small group of Libyan nationals who are Christians keep their faith secret. Libyans are forbidden to attend worship in official churches. The number of Libyan Christians from a Muslim background is very low, but with the appearance of Christian programs on satellite TV and Christian websites in Arabic, the interest in the Christian faith has been increasing. As in most Muslim countries, converting from Islam brings massive social pressure and converts are always at risk from their families. Most Libyan Christians are afraid to meet with other believers, as any kind of religious gathering (other than Islamic) is forbidden for Libyans.

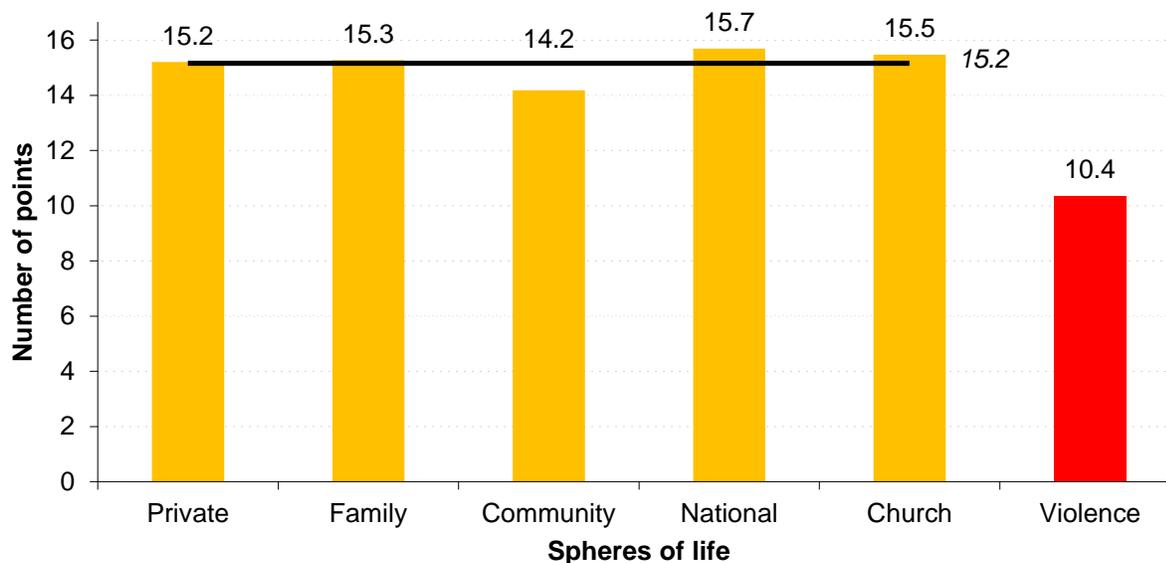
Non-traditional Christian communities:

This category does not exist in Libya as defined by WWL methodology.

⁷⁸ See: <https://www.amnesty.nl/actueel/eu-risks-fuelling-horrific-abuse-of-refugees-and-migrants-in-libya>, last accessed 9 December 2017.

Pressure in the 5 spheres of life and violence

WWL 2018 Persecution Pattern for Libya



(The maximum score for each block is 16.7)

The Persecution pattern shows:

- The pressure on Christians in Libya is at an extreme level in all *Spheres of life*. The average pressure rose from 14.6 in WWL 2017 to 15.2. This shows that the longer anarchy and instability persists in Libya, the worse the situation for Christians becomes.
- Pressure is particularly strong in the *National* and *Church spheres*. This is because Islamist militant groups are in control of a considerable part of the country and act as public authorities. This causes churches and Christians (especially those with a Muslim background) to face enormous pressure and they are under a constant threat of violence.
- The score for violence rose from 5.4 in WWL 2017 to 10.4. As stated already, this increase is partly due to more information being available about violence to transient migrants who are generally treated very badly and among whom Christians are singled out for even worse treatment.

Private sphere:

Converts with a Muslim background experience rejection by family members in this very conservative society. Because of the oppression caused by the intolerance of society and relatives, Libyan Christians hardly dare to inform others about their faith. Many of them are forced to consider fleeing their homeland.

Family sphere:

One of the problems converts face is how to find a partner to marry. The country adheres to traditional Islamic law which states that a non-Muslim man must convert to marry a Muslim woman. Islamists in Libya have become so radical, that even Sufis are being persecuted.

Community sphere:

Christians in contemporary Libya face such a high degree of insecurity that their continued existence in Libya has become questionable. Commenting on this matter, one UK country expert has even gone to the extent of asserting: “We have lost the Christian presence in Libya” due to the “daily pressures of religious tensions” as well as violence against [Christianity](#).⁷⁹ Unless Christians conceal their religious beliefs, taking part in communal life is quite risky in contemporary Libya since they face a high risk of violence.

National sphere:

During Gaddafi's reign the main source of persecution was the government and its secret services. Now, radical Islamic movements (such as the Islamic State group) are responsible for most of the pressure and violence against Christians, in a country with an impotent central government and where rule of law is absent. To some extent, criminal gangs are also responsible for pressure on Christians.

Church sphere:

Normal church life is hardly possible for Libyan nationals. Migrant workers can gather in churches, but are also faced with important security risks. To bring in Christian literature and Bibles in Arabic remains strictly forbidden. This is another factor that suppresses the growth of the indigenous Church. The proselytizing of Muslims and missionary activity is officially prohibited in the country.

Violence:

The level of violence against Christians in Libya is very high. Due to the political instability and absence of law and order in the country, Christians are subjected to very violent, inhumane and degrading treatment. Although just outside the WWL 2018 reporting period, a [report](#)⁸⁰ by Amnesty International gives a clear indication of what Christians are still going through today: A 26-year-old from Eritrea who was held in a detention center in al-Zawiya, is quoted as saying: “They hate Christians. If you’re a Christian, all I can say is God help you if they find out...If they see a cross or a [religious] tattoo they beat you a lot more.” Another former detainee (from Nigeria) said that guards in the detention center in Misratah would separate the men according to religion and flog those who were Christians. A 22-year-old man from Eritrea who was beaten in detention after his boat was intercepted, stated: “They beat me, took my money and threw away my Bible and the cross I had on my neck...First they check whether one has money in the pockets, then they take an electrical cable and they whip you.”

- Several Coptic Christians who were trying to go back to Egypt were detained in a prison in Tripoli’s airport for two weeks were flogged twice a day during while in detention. At least one of them had already been in captivity as a hostage for more than two weeks in Benghazi until his family paid [a ransom](#)⁸¹.
- In November 2016, two Egyptian Christians were executed in Libya by a group called Ansar al-Sharia due to their [faith](#).

⁷⁹ See: <http://www.breitbart.com/national-security/2017/04/20/expert-we-have-lost-the-christian-presence-in-libya/>, last accessed 27 September 2017.

⁸⁰ See: <https://www.amnesty.nl/actueel/eu-risks-fuelling-horrific-abuse-of-refugees-and-migrants-in-libya>.

⁸¹ See: <https://www.christianpost.com/news/coptic-christians-migrating-to-libya-to-find-work-face-severe-torture-we-know-well-likely-die-197738/>.

Gender profile of persecution

Female:

The form of persecution that occurs particularly to Christian women and girls is sexual assault and rape. In addition to the physical pain and injury that such attack causes on the victims, the trauma and emotional hardship it causes to their family, friends and fellow Christians is very high.

Male:

Forced labor and forms of slavery are widespread forms of abuse and persecution experienced by Christian men. Beatings, torture and degrading treatment are also ways through which Christian men suffer from persecution.

Future outlook

Due to the continuing prominence of local militias, including radical Islamic militants, and the absence of a single government with effective authority across the country, Christians cannot expect their situation to improve substantially in the foreseeable future. Widespread impunity for crimes committed against Christians is likely to continue. Even if the prominence and military might of IS has diminished in the WWL 2018 reporting period, the influence of radical Islamic groups in Libya will persist. The existence of rival governments in eastern and western Libya, the prevalence of tribalism and the fact that the country is awash with all kinds of weapons mean that the future of Libya as well as that of Christians in Libya is bleak.

Any hope for an improvement of the situation in Libya is contingent upon an improvement in the political and security condition within the country. Hopefully, the Government of National Accord will be able to assert more authority and restore law and order in the country. If this was to happen (even though it would not necessarily guarantee freedom of religion for Christians in Libya), such a state of affairs could mean that they would become less vulnerable from the most egregious forms of persecution. However, in the long run, the nature of the permanent political and constitutional order that would emerge from the current peace and transition process will be the most decisive factor for the freedom of religion of Christians in Libya.

Policy considerations

Taking into account the above persecution dynamics, Open Doors suggests the following policy recommendations:

- Strengthening state institutions is essential for rebuilding the country and ensuring fundamental rights including the freedom of religion. Therefore, the international community should redouble its efforts to strengthen state institutions and bring an end to the state of anarchy in Libya. Efforts at strengthening the state and resolving the conflict should also be accompanied by requirements concerning guarantees of the protection of the rights of minorities, including Christians.

- The international community should ensure that the UN-backed government in Tripoli (as well as other actors in Libya which are exercising state powers) fights impunity for the gross human rights violations and upholds the rights of minorities, including Christians.
- The UN and international community should monitor the activities of militia groups which seek to attack or reduce the freedom of religion or belief, and hold accountable those who are responsible for gross violations of human rights including freedom of religion.

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8. Iraq

Reporting period: 1 November 2016 - 31 October 2017

Position on World Watch List (WWL)

WWL 2018 Points: 86 / Position: 8

WWL 2017 Points: 86 / Position: 7

WWL 2016 Points: 90 / Position: 2

In WWL 2018 Iraq has the same score as in WWL 2017: 86 points. However, its position is one lower than last year: Rank 8 instead of 7. This situation is explained by a rise in the scores of other countries. Iraq's score for pressure decreased slightly and the score for violence increased. The slightly lower score for pressure is mostly explained by the Islamic State group (IS) losing territory in Iraq. However, its ideology is not dead and has influenced the local population. Although some Christian families have returned to their homes, the emigration of Christians is continuing due to fear and lack of hope for a good future. For Christians in the north, the aftermath of the referendum on Kurdish independence has also played a role in this desire to leave. Acts of violence against 'mainstream' Christians were mostly committed by radical Islamic militant groups or individuals, whereas converts from Islam mostly faced violence from their (extended) families.

Persecution engines

Persecution engines in Iraq ⁸²	
Islamic oppression	Very strong
Religious nationalism	Not at all
Ethnic antagonism	Strong
Denominational protectionism	Strong
Communist and post-Communist oppression	Not at all
Secular intolerance	Not at all
Dictatorial paranoia	Strong
Organized corruption and crime	Strong

Islamic oppression (Very strong):

Radical Islamic groups desire a religious cleansing of Iraq and aim to make the country purely Islamic. Since the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, the situation has continuously been deteriorating, with anti-Western (and as such, anti-Christian) sentiments causing considerable levels of violence by Islamic militants and insurgent groups. This situation is aggravated by government impunity and lawlessness. Moreover, radical Islamic groups have increased in number in northern and western regions, under the influence of the civil war in Syria.

In June 2014 IS proclaimed a caliphate in large parts of north and west Iraq including the region under its control in Syria. It implemented strict Islamic rules and was responsible for most of the violence against Christians in Iraq. By the end of 2017, most of the areas held by IS were dismantled and atrocities committed by IS were revealed. Large numbers of IS militants are said to have ‘disappeared’ in the population, posing a threat to religious minorities. New radical Islamist groups have emerged, like ‘Khorazan’, a group allegedly composed of former members of al-Qaeda. Under the influence of Islamic militant groups, Islamic awareness has become a new factor in the country, including the KRG (Kurdish Regional Government) zone. In the Iraqi and Kurdish governments the role of Islam is increasing due to regional developments. Several Shiite parties have warm relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran and consequently Iran’s influence in Iraq is increasing. Christians, in particular Christian converts with a Muslim background, have been reporting for some time that they are being monitored by Iranian secret services in areas close to the Iranian border. In general, Iraqi society seems to be turning more Islamic. There is an ongoing increase in the social control of women, the wearing of the headscarf and the observance of Ramadan. Even Christian women in Baghdad and Basra, have been forced to veil themselves in order to move safely outside of their homes. In areas controlled by IS, all women are forced to wear the full veil which covers the face.

⁸² The scale for the level of influence of Persecution engines and Drivers in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong.

Ethnic antagonism:

Iraqi society is still very tribal. Belonging to a tribe is very often more important than obeying government law. Age-old norms and values exert a controlling influence on tribal society. Where this tribalism is mixed with Islam, it will especially affect Christians with a Muslim background. If a convert's tribal background is known, it may cause difficulties for any other Christians and deter them from helping him/her. Tribal groups have influence within and/or over government authorities in some areas.

Organized corruption and crime:

Corruption plays an important role in the persecution of Christians in Iraq as can be seen in the ransoms demanded when Christians are abducted and in the illegal taking of Christian-owned houses and land. According to the NGO, Bagdad Beituna (Baghdad Our Home), there have been more than "[7,000 violations](#) against properties belonging to Iraqi Christians in Baghdad"⁸³ since 2003, especially properties belonging to Christians who left the country. One Bagdad official stated that almost 70% of Baghdad's Christian homes have been illegally taken. The vulnerable position of religious minorities like Christians is being exploited. Corruption is deeply rooted in Iraqi society, right up to the highest levels. Also, it is especially people in (or close to) political power - including Muslim militia backed by Iran - who are occupying not just Christian-owned homes but also churches and monasteries.

Denominational protectionism:

In the south and Center of Iraq, Christians who have moved from a Historical church to join a non-traditional Christian group can face threats and opposition from family members, tribal leaders and society around them. These threats include the risk of losing jobs, inheritances or the means to marry. Bishops of Historical churches have also be known to refuse to hold weddings for members who have been visiting Evangelical churches. Families and community often disassociate themselves from such cross-denominational converts.

Drivers of persecution

Drivers of persecution in Iraq	
Government officials at any level from local to national	Very Strong
Ethnic group leaders	Strong
Non-Christian religious leaders at any level from local to national	Very Strong
Christian religious leaders at any level from local to national	Medium
Violent religious groups	Very Strong
Ideological pressure groups	Not at all
Normal citizens (people from the general public), including mobs	Strong
Own (extended) family	Very Strong
Political parties at any level from local to national	Strong

⁸³ See: <http://www.christiantoday.com/article/baghdad.70.per.cent.of.christian.homes.illegally.seized/55902.htm>, last accessed 14 December 2016.

Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups	Not at all
Organised crime cartels or networks	Weak
Multilateral organisations (e.g. UN) and embassies	Very Weak

Violent religious groups such as IS and other radical militants are known for targeting Christians and other religious minorities through kidnappings and killings. Another source of persecution are Islamic leaders at any level, mostly in the form of hate-speech in mosques. Government officials at all levels are reported to threaten Christians and “encourage” them to emigrate. Also, normal citizens in the north have reportedly made remarks in public, questioning why Christians are still in Iraq. Clan leaders, extended family and normal citizens put serious pressure on Christians with a Muslim background to get them to return to Islam, and this sometimes includes attempts at killing the convert. By failing to promote a pluralistic society, political parties also contribute to the persecution of Christians. The kidnapping of Christians often comes in the form of organized crime, having both financial and religious motives. On a lower level of persecution, leaders of Historic churches have sometimes thwarted the official recognition of new Christian denominations. Finally, multilateral organizations such as UN/UNHCR or large(r) international NGOs are reported to sometimes ignore helping Christian refugee camps and do not approve of other agencies focusing specifically on helping Christian IDPs.

Context

Christians have a long history in Iraq. Iraq’s second biggest city Mosul – since mid-2017 liberated from IS militants - is the current name of the former city Nineveh, from the biblical book of Jonah. There was a long tradition of Christians living in Iraqi cities like Baghdad, Mosul and Basra. Before the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, Iraq was home to one of the largest Christian communities of the Middle East. Christians have lived here for two millennia but are currently on the verge of extinction. Over the last years, Iraq has suffered from structural uncertainty, conflict and instability. One of the all-time lows was when large areas of north and west Iraq became part of IS’s self-proclaimed caliphate in June 2014. The Iraqi government is incapable of enforcing the rule of law and of providing a minimum of security. Corruption levels are soaring and sectarian violence does not seem to stop.

Iraq is divided into two parts, the semi-autonomous Kurdish region in the north, officially governed by the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) based in Erbil, and the large remaining Arab part, mostly controlled by the Iraqi Government in Baghdad. Kurds and Arabs have their own separate languages and culture. Most of Iraq’s oil resources are found near Kirkuk and Mosul, the border areas between the Kurdish region and Arab Iraq, and these have long been among the most violent places in Iraq. Christians are caught here in the crossfire of two different battles - one for a Kurdish autonomous country and one for a religious cleansing of Iraq by Islamic terrorist groups (including IS) who wish to make the country purely Islamic. On the other hand, there have also been glimmers of hope: By the end of 2017, most of the areas that had been under IS control were now back under government control and and Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi declared the war against IS to be over. Also, cooperation between pastors with a Muslim background in some places in the north has been increasing. Historical Christian communities and organizations have

been reaching out to refugees from IS controlled areas in Iraq and Syria by distributing blankets and toys. Churches in Erbil and Dohuk were also able to bring full-scale humanitarian aid to thousands of IDP families.

Other religious minorities facing persecution in Iraq are Yazidis, Kakai and Sabaeen Mandaean. They mostly face discrimination and exclusion for being non-Muslims. Especially Yazidis are known to have suffered atrocities under IS, especially women and girls who were taken as sex slaves. More than 3,500 Yazidi women and girls are currently missing and possibly still in the hands of IS.

Christian communities and how they are affected

Communities of expatriate Christians:

Expatriate Christians have not been counted as a separate category according to WWL-Methodology as they do not usually function as a separate group in Iraq.

Historical Christian communities:

Churches such as the Assyrian Orthodox Church, the Chaldean Catholic or Syrian Catholic Church and the Armenian Church are all seriously affected by persecution from fanatical Islamic movements and non-Christian leaders. They also face discrimination from government authorities. In central and southern Iraq, Christians often do not publicly display Christian symbols like a cross as this can lead to harassment or discrimination at check-points, university, work-place or government buildings. Even Christians in the KRG region have reportedly removed the cross from their cars so as not to attract unwanted attention. (Several years ago, the Catholic seminary was no longer able to operate in Baghdad as a result of kidnapping threats and attacks by Islamic militants, and was forced to move to the KRG.)

Communities of converts to Christianity:

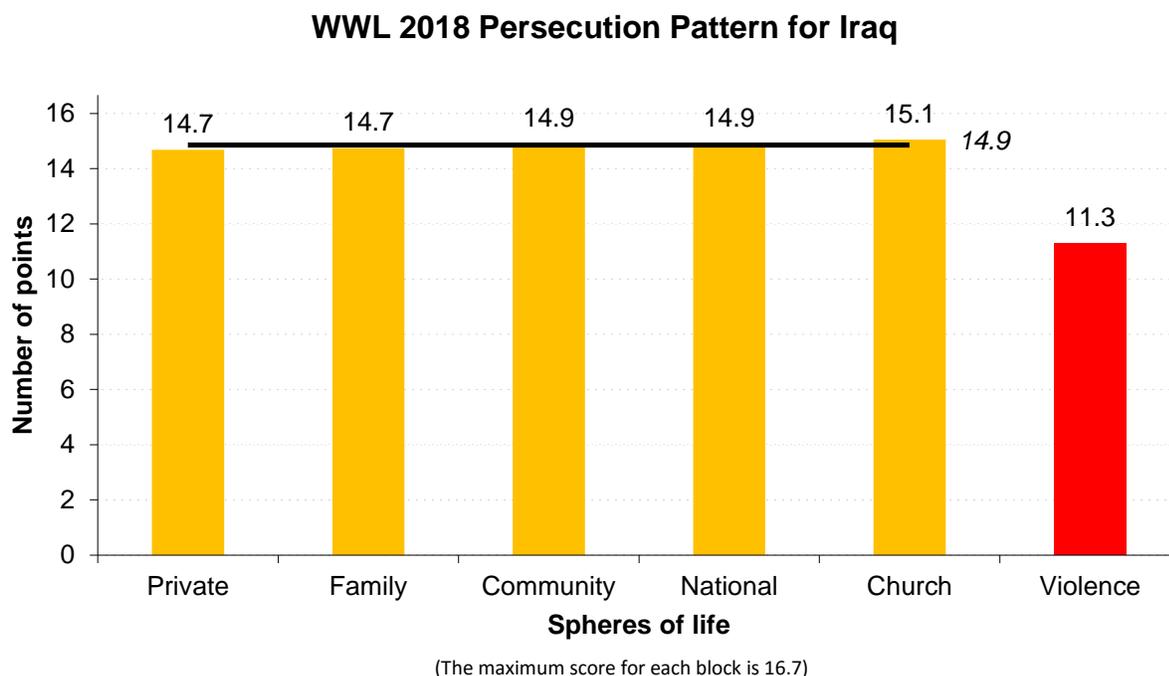
This concerns Christians from a Muslim or a Historical Christian community background who now join in worship with non-traditional Christian communities. Converts from Islam experience most pressure from (extended) family and often keep their new faith a secret as they risk being threatened by their family members, tribal leaders and society around them. They risk losing inheritance rights and the right or means to marry. To openly leave Islam leads to difficult situations in the entire country and is especially dangerous in IS-held territory. In the south and center of the country, converts are also put under pressure by government authorities. Changing church (e.g. from an Orthodox to an Evangelical congregation) is also often punished by refusing rights, such as losing jobs. A bishop refused to perform marriages for members of his Orthodox church who had been attending Evangelical churches.

Non-traditional Christian communities:

Evangelical, Baptist and Pentecostal churches in Bagdad and Basra, are also seriously affected by persecution from fanatical Islamic movements and non-Christian leaders, including discrimination from the authorities. To some extent Evangelical Christians are also affected by opposition from (extended) family. Outspoken Christians have regularly become targets in central and southern Iraq. Blasphemy laws

can be used against them too if they are suspected of outreach among Muslims. For Evangelicals there is no legal framework for setting up a Bible school or for recruiting and registering organizations from the outside to support them in this.

Pressure in the 5 spheres of life and violence



The persecution pattern for Iraq shows:

- The average pressure on Christians in Iraq is at an extreme level (14.9), decreasing from 15.2 in the WWL 2017 reporting period. Extreme levels of pressure are recorded in every *Sphere of life*. This is typical for a situation in which there are many different persecution engines acting:
 - Pressure from *Islamic oppression* affects all five *Spheres of life* especially for converts.
 - *Ethnic antagonism* (blended with *Islamic oppression*) is most prevalent in the *Family* and *Private spheres of life*.
 - *Organized corruption and crime* is mostly expressed in the *Community* and *National spheres of life*.
 - *Denominational protectionism* particularly affects the *church, family* and *private sphere of life*.
- The level of violence against Christians is very high (11.3 points), rising from 10.4 in WWL 2017. The increase is explained by three Christians being killed, two Christians being detained (in IS territory) and a Christian sentenced to death (in IS-held territory) and around 60 Christians being kidnapped or missing in the WWL 2018 reporting period. See below under “Violence” for details. These numbers were higher than in WWL 2017 but are still conservative figures; in reality they

could be higher. There were no verified reports on the number of forced marriages available (which occurred more than 10 times under IS in the WWL 2017 reporting period).

- The overall persecution situation in Iraq in the WWL 2018 reporting period was characterized by impunity, the threat of attacks by Islamic militants and second class treatment by the authorities.

Private sphere:

Of all Christians, it is converts who are the most restricted in their personal practice of faith. Often, they cannot publicly share their new faith or possess Christian materials. Pressure was high especially in areas held by IS but also in central and southern Iraq. This is true to a lesser extent in the KRG region. Although - as the WWL 2018 reporting period progressed - there were fewer Christians being held in IS-controlled areas, all categories of Christians were seriously restricted in their personal worship of God, e.g. they cannot sing out loud.

Family sphere:

Converts from Islam often have to hide their Christian faith from their Islamic families due to the shame this brings to the family. They run the risk of being threatened and abandoned. For all types of Christianity, life for Christian families was severely restricted in IS-controlled areas. But also in the rest of Iraq, Christian parents are careful what they share about their faith with their children. If the children would for instance talk about their faith in school – especially during Islamic classes - the family risks blasphemy accusations.

Community sphere:

Also in their community, it is too risky for converts from Islam to be open about their faith. If their faith is known, they will – in the best of circumstances - face discrimination. This is even worse in IS-held areas, where all types of Christians have to be silent about their religion. Being a convert from Islam to Christianity is like a death warrant in IS-controlled territory but also in the central and southern regions. All women in IS areas are forced to fully veil themselves. But also in Baghdad and Basra Christian women are put under pressure to wear a veil. Even in the north of the country (Dohuk, Zakho and some areas of Erbil) there is a growing social pressure on Christian women to wear a head scarf. In the KRG region, Christians are increasingly under pressure from the local Muslim population who accuse them of taking their jobs.

National sphere:

Sharia is the primary source of law, which forbids the conversion of Muslims to other religions. As such, Christians with a Muslim background will be discriminated against in their interaction at a national level if their new faith is known. It is not possible to have their religion changed on their ID cards and their children are also automatically registered as Muslims. The ongoing Islamization of society in the entire country, including in the KRG region, could also be seen in the implementation of laws on religious registration in 2015, and in the ban on the sale of alcohol in October 2016. The latter was followed by an attack on two Christian owned shops selling alcohol just before Christmas 2016, in which at least three Christians died and two were injured.

The registration law forces non-Muslim children to become Muslim if the male parent converts to Islam or if their mother marries a Muslim. The law was passed in spite of protests by religious minorities. A few

days after the ban on the sale of alcohol was imposed, a Christian owner of a restaurant and store where alcohol could be purchased was killed in front of his business. In the Kurdish region in north Iraq, there are attempts to “kurdicize” society by land being sold to Kurdish Muslims or Yazidis in some predominantly Christian areas and towns. This “demographic reversal process” has been going on for years in several majority Christian areas in the Kurdish region. In a more recent development, Shiites are also trying to change the demographics in Nineveh plain. As such, a school, donated by Iran and named “Emma Khomayni”, after the Islamic Republic’s first spiritual leader, was opened in Bartella sub-district.

Church sphere:

In areas under the control of IS, churches and monasteries were either demolished or used for other purposes (jails, Islamic centers, stables). It was practically impossible to have any kind of church life in IS-held areas since public gatherings not organized by IS were forbidden. Most Christians had fled from those areas, though a handful remained, some in hiding and others in captivity. Most were forced to convert to Islam and attend Islamic prayers. Refusal was punished by beatings. A disturbing development in central and southern Iraq is the lack of priests or church members in some churches – due to emigration as a result of a lack of safety for church leaders. This has led to some church buildings being put up for sale. Though not a nationwide phenomenon, Church leaders like pastors and priests are still being targeted and killed by Islamic militants to set an example and scare others, especially in Baghdad.

Violence:

Acts of violence against ‘mainstream’ Christians were mostly committed by radical Islamic militant groups or individuals, whereas Christians with a Muslim background mostly faced violence from their (extended) families.

- At least three Christians were killed and two wounded in an attack on two shops selling alcohol close to Baghdad on 23 December 2016. Local Christians interpret this to be a deliberate act against Christians, especially considering the timing directly before Christmas and Christians being the only ones who sell alcohol in Iraq.
- Atrocities committed during or before the liberation of majority Christian towns like Qaraqosh became known last January 2017, when eight bodies - most probably belonging to Christians - were found. Some were killed over a year ago, others more recently. It is clear proof of how violent IS acted during and before the liberation of the Nineveh Plain in October and November 2016, but since it is uncertain if the killings occurred in the WWL 2018 reporting period, they have not been scored.
- At least two Christians, a widow and her teenage son, were officially detained by IS in prison and forced to become Muslims in Mosul in November 2016. They were able to flee the city. At least 58 Christians were held by IS in Mosul during the WWL 2018 reporting period and are currently still missing. It is unknown whether they were killed or abducted.
- During the WWL 2018 reporting period, there were several incidents of Christians with a Muslim background being physically attacked, tortured or kidnapped by their families as a result of their conversion.

- A glaring example of hate speech was reported by Middle East Monitor on 17 May 2017⁸⁴: One of Iraq's most [senior Shiite government clerics](#) publicly stated that Christians, Jews and other religious minorities must convert to Islam, pay the religious tax (*jizya*) or be killed. Sheikh Alaa Al-Mousawi also called Christians “infidels” and “polytheists” and stressed the need of *jihad* against them. In reaction, almost 200 Iraqi Christian families filed a lawsuit accusing him of inciting sectarian violence against Christians.
- Thousands of Christians continued to seek a safe place to live either inside or outside the country. This happened under influence of different political developments inside the country including being trapped between different warring parties like the clashes between Iraqi and Kurdish forces after the Kurdish independence referendum. For the scoring we only included cases that were demonstrable directly related to persecution.
- Finally, a large number of Christian owned houses and property were damaged, taken or looted during or before the liberations of IS held areas in the Nineveh plain in the last quarter of 2017. However, taking over of Christian owned properties has been going on for years in Baghdad and cities in the south like Al Basrah, Al Nasiriyah, Al Emara, Babylon and Al Kut. According to the representative of Christians at the Iraqi parliament, Joseph Slewa, “approximately thirty thousand seizures of land and properties belonging to Syriac and Chaldean Christians in Baghdad and other provinces”⁸⁵ which have been taken over by militias that belong to some political parties in Iraq. According to Slewa, the culprits are “groups in power who exploit their authority to seize property. Some groups are taking advantage of their work and authority at the governmental offices” to produce falsified documents. Other groups (mafia) work through real estate offices and engage in fraud to seize properties owned by Christians.

Gender profile of persecution

Female:

Of all WWL categories of Christian communities, female converts from Islam are particularly vulnerable to persecution for their faith. However, other Christian females also face inequality, e.g. if their husbands convert to Islam. In the case of female converts, pressure comes most often from the side of the (wider) family. When she still lives with her family, a convert risks abuse in the form of house-arrest, sexual harassment, rape and even death, if her faith is revealed. Female converts from Islam cannot officially marry male Christians, as the Iraqi state still considers them Muslims and Muslim women are not allowed to marry non-Muslims. When married to a Muslim husband, a female convert risks abuse and death threats from her husband or his family which cause some to flee. They are also faced with travel restrictions. Travel bans can be imposed by the authorities but also by family, for instance to prevent the female convert from leaving the country. If this ban is violated, a court case can be started for “travelling without permission”. Female converts are also under the threat of forced divorce. The attitude of the spouse’s family is crucial in this issue.

⁸⁴ See: <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20170517-shia-cleric-iraq-christians-infidels-who-must-convert-or-be-killed/>.

⁸⁵ See: <http://www.ishtartv.com/viewarticle,76682.html>, last accessed 10 December 2017.

IS is known for its inferior treatment of women, especially those from religious minorities. Since establishing its so-called caliphate in parts of Iraq and Syria in June 2014, IS abducted and forced large numbers of Yazidi but also several Christian women into marriages with IS-fighters. They suffered sexual enslavement and sex trafficking. Though their numbers have decreased, Yazidi and Christian women who are still missing could very well continue to be facing sexual abuse at present. Furthermore, IS has reportedly killed women for not wearing a scarf, forcing non-Muslims to veil themselves as well. Also outside of IS-held territory, Christian women and girls are now wearing veils for their own safety. Unveiled women in Baghdad and Basra are likely to be harassed, pelted with stones, kidnapped or killed.

On the whole, Iraqi society is characterized by widespread lawlessness. For Christian women this is compounded by the fact there is general impunity for violations against Christians, be it stealing property, kidnapping, sexual abuse or corruption. The higher connections and higher status of the Muslim perpetrator means they will always win the case, especially under the tribal justice system which can override national justice. On a community level, in state schools, Christian girls are seen as weaker and often ridiculed for their faith, according to one country researcher. They are reportedly under pressure to convert to Islam and their grades can be impacted if they openly challenge concepts which contradict their Christian faith. In conclusion, Christian women – especially converts from Islam - suffer from unequal treatment in all sectors of society.

Male:

Christian men reportedly face discrimination at work and education in Iraq. Job discrimination affects men belonging to all WWL categories of Christian communities, especially those working in the public sector. Christians in central and south Iraq have been put under pressure to leave their jobs, especially if they are working for foreign organizations or are employed at higher levels of society (e.g. government companies). In the north, Christians report to struggle to get employment and allegedly feel vulnerable and prone to be exploited at their jobs, according to one country researcher. In the mostly traditional and tribal Iraqi society, men are often the primary breadwinners for their families and losing their jobs can have a considerable effect on Christian families. This problem affects Christians with a Muslim background in all sectors of society; if their faith is known they will face serious problems finding and keeping employment.

Male converts with a Muslim background can face persecution from their families, including violent death. Also men from a non-Muslim Christian background risk being killed for their faith, the perpetrators being mostly radical Islamic militants. The consequences of this can be far-reaching for their families, who apart from being left without income, often face emotional trauma if the man flees or is killed. A convert's family could face also mockery and pressure from the husband's Muslim family. The loss of Christian men not only affects their direct families, but also the local church which consequently finds itself confronted with a lack of potential leadership. As such, Christian men - particular former Muslims - are in a very vulnerable position to sustain their families.

Future outlook

The Economist Intelligence Unit summarizes the main recent developments and its expectations for Iraq as follows: “Iraqi forces have made significant progress against Islamic State (IS) in 2017, with the jihadi group likely to be territorially defeated around end-2017. This, along with the swift retaking of disputed territories from the Kurds, following the late September independence referendum, place prime minister, Haider al-Abadi, in a strong position to win re-election in 2018. However, he will remain under some pressure owing to the impact of low oil prices and huge reconstruction costs on the budget.”⁸⁶

In spite of the imminent defeat of Islamic State in Iraq, the threat of persecution engine *Islamic oppression* is not expected to diminish considerably in the short run. IS may have lost territory but its ideology is still very much alive and not limited to physical land. In an effort to prove they are still relevant, IS continues to execute and inspire attacks in the West and in the Middle East. Meanwhile, thousands of fleeing IS militants have “disappeared”, absorbed into the civilian population of the Nineveh plains – adding to feelings of insecurity of religious minorities such as Christians. Also, IS is not the only driver of this persecution engine. There are al-Qaeda remnants, Shiite militias and other militant Islamic groups emerging, such as the Khorazan group which is composed of former al-Qaeda members and said to be even crueler than IS. Pressure also comes from Shiite leaders and government officials, making offensive public statements against Christians. Meanwhile in the KRG-governed region in the north, Islamic awareness is reportedly awakening. Consequently, *Islamic oppression* is expected to continue to be a threat to Iraq’s Christians, leading to high levels of fear and encouraging them to emigrate.

The loss of a common enemy, the subsequent power vacuum and the aftermath of the Kurdish independence referendum are likely to increase divisions between tribal and sectarian groups, which can strengthen the persecution engine *Ethnic antagonism*. Pressure will especially increase on Christians from a Muslim background, who suffer most from this engine, but also on other Christians.

Amidst these increased tensions between different population groups, Christians face the risk of being caught between clashing parties, leading to Christians relocating to safer areas. They could also be pulled along or used in this political power-struggle, a development which will increase *Dictatorial paranoia*. Moreover, there is a serious threat that the next war after the defeat of IS will be between Shiite forces and the Kurds. This persecution engine, *Dictatorial paranoia*, is also active in the central Iraqi government and leads to the failure to support a pluralistic society where religious minorities such as Christians would be truly welcome. In the event of a wide-scale power-struggle another important persecution engine in Iraq, *Organized corruption and crime*, is likely to flourish. Growing levels of corruption are already observed among both KRG and Baghdad governments. Drivers of this engine are specifically disadvantaging Christians in the areas of finding jobs and registering Christian companies but are also taking properties belonging to Christians.

See: ⁸⁶ <http://country.eiu.com/Iraq>, last accessed 10 December 2017.

Finally, it is hard to say how the persecution engine *Denominational protectionism* will develop. On the one hand, in situations of pressure there is a need for Christians to work together, which could soften the influence of this engine. According to short term expectations, this need will continue to exist, though increased fragmentations along tribal lines and survival sentiments could also work out in the opposite direction.

Policy considerations

Open Doors suggests the following recommendations:

- The KRG and Iraqi government should ensure future legal frameworks in the countries fully promote and protect the equal and inalienable rights of all their citizens, irrespective of race, religion or other status. Thereby:
 - Endorsing by law the creation of a National Accountability Mechanism to monitor instances of discrimination based on religious or ethnic belonging, and to ensure accountability for violations.
 - Fully applying Article 14 of the Iraqi Constitution which recognizes and upholds the equal rights and status of people of all religions before the law without discrimination.
- The international community and local governments should ensure the dignified and continued improvement of living conditions for all citizens, but especially for the refugees and internally displaced – including the provision of adequate housing, education and jobs. Thereby:
 - Instigate and encouraging flexible funding opportunities to allow a variety of well-coordinated, non-partisan, in-country Faith and Community Based Organizations (FBOs/CBOs), such as churches and mosques, to provide access to food, safe drinking water and essential medical supplies; regain normality by initiating a variety of locally-appropriate psycho-social care, reconciliation and community-building projects amongst the displaced; and initiate rehabilitation and reconstruction activities, such as housing repair and income-generating projects. EU delegations and large NGO consortia managing local calls for proposals and funding should include faith-based organizations and religious leaders in their increased engagement with local CBOs and minority aid organizations.
 - Ensuring that the government discourse and education curricula in Iraq affirms religiously pluralistic society which promotes tolerance, respect and peaceful coexistence between people of all religions and ethnicities.
 - All donors, the EU and its Member States ensuring they fulfil commitments to deliver humanitarian assistance swiftly, and with the express inclusion of local civil society and faith-based groups and aid organizations.
- The international community along with the KRG and Iraqi governments should identify and equip religious leaders and faith-based organizations to play a constructive and central role in reconciling and rebuilding Iraqi society, thereby:

- Supporting the establishment of a grass-roots Peace Programme, with projects run by faith-based organisations and other active civil society organisations. The programme should support and equip existing peacebuilding and reconciliation initiatives in Syria and Iraq, and promote the valuable role of civil society in restoring peace to both countries.
- The EU and Iraqi government should uphold the human rights focus of their Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, ensuring that religious freedom as a fundamental human right is protected in all strategies to combat terrorism and boost security.
- The EU and Iraqi government should ensure that the humanitarian law and refugee law instruments mainstreamed in the EU-Iraq Partnership Cooperation Agreement are fully implemented in refugee and IDP policies.
- The international community should ensure follow-up reporting on EU Member State responses to the call of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and European Parliament to undertake a stronger commitment to finding protection for refugees fleeing due to persecution on religious or ethnic grounds through resettlement, humanitarian admission schemes, simplified family reunification or more flexible visa regulations.
- The European Parliament and UN should continually monitor and report on atrocities committed against Christians and Yazidis.⁸⁷
- The EU External Action Service (EEAS), EU Member States and European Commission should respond urgently to the European Parliament Resolution calling for a repatriation plan for religious groups.

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⁸⁷ On 21 September 2017 the UN Security Council voted unanimously to create an investigative team to collect evidence of genocide and war crimes committed against civilians by IS members. See: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/>, last accessed 22 September 2017.

9. Yemen

Reporting period: 1 November 2016 - 31 October 2017

Position on World Watch List (WWL)

WWL 2018 Points: 85 / Position: 9

WWL 2017 Points: 85 / Position: 9

WWL 2016 Points: 78 / Position: 11

With a score of 85 points, Yemen ranks 9 on WWL 2018, the same score and position as in WWL 2017. Although the total score has remained the same, there has been a change in the scores for pressure and violence. The number of reported violent incidents decreased, whereas the pressure in general increased as a result of the civil war (see the sections on *Spheres of Life and Violence*). Like other civilians, Yemen's Christians are suffering greatly from the war including the rising influence of radical Islamic militants, which adds to the already vulnerable position of indigenous Christians. Most expatriate and migrant Christians have left the country, leaving a Church now composed mainly of indigenous Christians with a Muslim background.

Persecution engines

Persecution engines in Yemen ⁸⁸	
Islamic oppression	Very strong
Religious nationalism	Not at all
Ethnic antagonism	Very strong
Denominational protectionism	Not at all
Communist and post-Communist oppression	Not at all
Secular intolerance	Not at all
Dictatorial paranoia	Weak
Organized corruption and crime	Medium

Islamic oppression:

The Constitution declares that Islam is the state religion and *Sharia* is the source of all legislation. Proselytization by faiths other than Islam is prohibited and Muslims are forbidden to convert to any other religion. Yemenis who leave Islam may face the death penalty. Within the context of war, the influence of Islamic militant groups such as Islamic State (IS) and al-Qaeda has grown considerably. They are the main drivers of this persecution engine and have actively targeted and killed Christians.

⁸⁸ The scale for the level of influence of Persecution engines and Drivers in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong.

Ethnic antagonism:

Yemeni society is strongly tribal and government authority is often secondary to the traditional tribal governance. Islam is intertwined with ethnic identity. There are many areas in Yemen, where tribal elders enforce law and justice according to their Islam-based traditions regardless of what the national constitution or government says. Moreover, the government is not likely to intervene in inter-tribal conflicts, even if tribes are physically harming or imprisoning people. With the government having currently lost control over large parts of the country, its influence on the tribes has further diminished. Tribal law and custom prohibit members of the tribe from leaving the tribe or, in the case of women, marrying out of the tribe, especially to a Christian; punishment for disobedience can be death or banishment. One political analyst sums up the situation well: “Islam is an overarching identity of all of the tribes in Yemen, and it is the tribe that often delivers retributive ‘justice’ for those who may seek to leave Islam.”

Organized corruption and crime:

This engine describes the persecution situation where groups or individuals are creating a climate of impunity, anarchy and corruption as a means for self-enrichment. Government corruption has long been rampant in Yemen. Government authorities are tied to various tribes, which are shown great favoritism. Expatriate Christians and Westerners – of whom there are currently hardly any left - are especially vulnerable to criminal offences such as kidnapping for ransom. In such cases the Christian’s perceived financial status and his/her faith play a role. In the current chaos and lawlessness of the war, this engine now has more space to develop.

Drivers of persecution

Drivers of persecution in Yemen	
Government officials at any level from local to national	Strong
Ethnic group leaders	Strong
Non-Christian religious leaders at any level from local to national	Strong
Christian religious leaders at any level from local to national	Not at all
Violent religious groups	Very Strong
Ideological pressure groups	Not at all
Normal citizens (people from the general public), including mobs	Weak
Own (extended) family	Very Strong
Political parties at any level from local to national	Weak
Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups	Strong
Organized crime cartels or networks	Weak
Multilateral organizations (e.g. UN) and embassies	Very Weak

The following drivers of persecution are active in Yemen: Government officials at any level from local to national, violent religious groups, extended family, ethnic group leaders and non-Christian religious leaders at any level from local to national. Government officials create and maintain a strict Islamic system

that treats all nationals as Muslims. Foreign interventions, such as that of the Saudi-led coalition, have created power vacuums that have allowed fanatical movements like Islamic State (IS) and al-Qaeda affiliates to expand their operations and even kill Christians - both Yemeni converts from a Muslim background and foreigners. Abductions occur as well and can be based on both financial and religious (i.e. anti-Christian) motives, which are often hard to distinguish. Converts from Islam to Christianity are mostly suffering from violence and pressure from their extended family but also from tribal leaders, if their new faith is discovered. Non-Christian religious leaders, like imams are reported to have played a role in instigating attacks on Christians.

External forces such as the Saudi-led coalition and the influx of weapons that have poured in from the West, have caused an ongoing vacuum of power that has allowed radical Islamic forces such as AQAP and IS to target Christians with impunity. This - along with the weapons from the West falling into the hands of militants - is one the greatest threats to the Yemeni Church.

Context

Yemen is in a complex and devastating war fought between the Shiite Houthi rebels and supporters of Yemen's internationally recognized government. In attempts to restore the government against the Houthi rebels who are allegedly supported by Iran, Sunni Saudi Arabia is bombing Yemen from the air, destroying residential areas, infrastructure, hospitals and world heritage sites. In this military operation, Saudi Arabia is actively supported by ten mostly Sunni Muslim nations and being equipped with weapons from the West. Sunni extremist groups like al-Qaeda and the Islamic State group (IS) use the chaos to gain territory and impose their control. As the conflict drags on, more countries risk being involved in the Saudi-Iranian battle for regional hegemony which will further sharpen sectarian fault lines in the Middle East. Yemen is a relatively young country with tribal North Yemen and Communist South Yemen only merging as one national state in 1990 after years of fighting. However, the separatist movement in the South is quite strong and continues to demand independence.

Since the ousting of former President Ali Abdullah Saleh in 2012, Yemen has seen political turmoil and violence. In the power vacuum, militants and rebels – including groups affiliated with al-Qaeda and IS - are fighting to gain control of territory. In March 2015, after taking over Yemen's capital airport in Sanaa (including crucial government ministries and a successful domination of the northern regions) a Shiite insurgent group known as the Houthis forced President Abd Rabbuh Mansour Hadi and his government into exile in Saudi Arabia. In July 2015, forces loyal to the government and southern militias regained control of Aden from the Houthis, backed by the troops and airstrikes of the Saudi-led coalition, which started in March 2015. In September 2015 President Hadi returned to Aden. In the meantime, the influence of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) appears to be growing further as it expands its territorial control in southern Yemen. IS-affiliated groups are also present in the war-torn country and have been attacking both Shiite and government related targets since March 2015.

Meanwhile, Yemen is facing a dire humanitarian crisis and development has gone back 100 years in time. Since the start of the war in March 2015, more than 10,000 Yemenis have been killed and 3.1 million people have been displaced⁸⁹. In a United Nations News Center press release published on 28 August 2017, the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) was quoted as follows: “Amid continued violence, water and sanitation systems are collapsing, and more than half of Yemen's health facilities are out of service.” Almost 15 million people are reportedly cut off from safe water and access to basic healthcare. “In addition, the country remains on the brink of famine, with an estimated 385,000 children suffering from severe acute malnutrition, putting them at heightened risk of acute watery diarrhea and cholera.”⁹⁰ Christians are suffering from the effects of war like other Yemeni’s. Several of them had to leave their communities and are now scattered all over the country.

There is also a small group of Bahai believers in Yemen who experience persecution. Radical Muslims consider them to be infidels, others discriminate them because of allegedly having connections with Iran, where the religion was founded in the 19th century. Bahai believers in Yemen are occasionally imprisoned, mistreated, and tortured.⁹¹

Christian communities and how they are affected

Communities of expatriate Christians:

Previously, most Christians in Yemen were expatriate or migrant workers (from North Africa, the West, South and East Asia, or Arab countries) and refugees (mainly Ethiopian). The majority were Roman Catholics or Anglicans (with some Orthodox in the case of Ethiopian refugees). Virtually all Western expatriates have left the country for security reasons as a result of the devastating war. Migrant Christians, particularly from Africa and also from Asia remain in the country though many have left as well. Migrant Christians face harassment and discrimination from society at a community and national level, and even outspoken violence from radical Islamic movements.

Historical Christian communities:

Indigenous historical Christian communities are not present in Yemen.

Communities of converts to Christianity:

At least 95% of the Yemeni church is made up of converts from Islam. They face severe persecution and effectively need to live their faith in secret. They face persecution from authorities (including detention and interrogations), family and radical Islamic groups who threaten apostates with death if they do not reconvert. The number of indigenous Christians with a Muslim background is estimated at just a few

⁸⁹ See: <https://www.sfcg.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Pathways-for-Peace-Stability-in-Yemen.pdf> last accessed 6 September 2017.

⁹⁰ See: <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=57422#.Wa0-y38UnDc>, last accessed 4 September 2017.

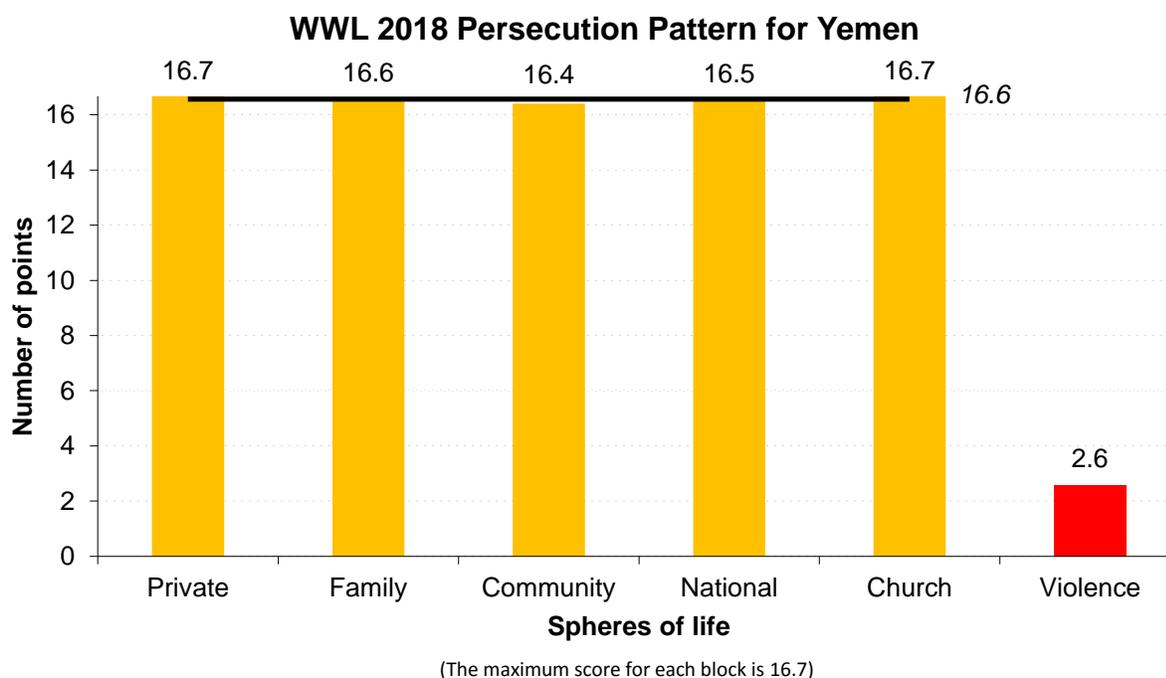
⁹¹ See: <http://www.worldatlas.com/articles/religious-beliefs-in-yemen.html>, last accessed 11 December 2017.

thousand but is reportedly growing because of the war and insecurity. In the current situation of war, the main drivers of persecution are Islamic militant groups and family.

Non-traditional Christian communities:

Indigenous non-traditional Christian communities are not present in Yemen.

Pressure in the 5 spheres of life and violence



The persecution pattern for Yemen shows:

- The average pressure on Christians in Yemen is at an extreme level (16.6), increasing from 15.9 in WWL 2017. The extreme pressure is explained by the war and the departure of most expatriate or migrant Christians. As a result only indigenous Christians have been focused on in the WWL research and they experience the highest levels of persecution.
- Pressure in all *Spheres of life* is at an extreme level. The *Private* and *Church spheres* both scored the maximum possible (16.7), directly followed by the *Family sphere* with 16.6 points. This is typical for a situation in which there are mostly Christians with a Muslim background in a country with *Islamic oppression* as the main persecution engine, leaving no room for any open church activities or private worship.
- The level of violence against Christians decreased from 5.9 in WWL 2017 to 2.6. In the WWL 2018 reporting period, there were no reports of Christians killed for their faith or of Christian buildings being attacked. At least 70 Christians relocated inside the country and one family of converts left

the country because of religious persecution. Mental abuse, including death threats, affected at least 20 converts from Islam.

- The overall persecution in Yemen corresponds to the current chaotic and lawless situation of war, in which local Christians are additionally vulnerable.

Private sphere:

Christians with a Muslim background cannot openly practice their faith. Any impression to those around them that they may be Christians can have serious consequences. Private worship has become particularly risky for Christians in areas controlled by radical Muslims or areas that were “liberated” by Sunni forces. Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and IS control large parts of the country.

Family sphere:

All Yemeni's are considered Muslims. For a Muslim family, it brings shame when one of its members leaves Islam. Converts to Christianity run the great risk of honor-killing or physical violence if their families or communities discover their faith. Open Christian weddings cannot be celebrated in Yemen and converts must marry under Islamic rite. Converts cannot have their children registered as Christians, and in school their children are obliged to attend Islamic classes. In the case of custody of children in divorces, Christians are likely to be excluded if family members are Muslims.

Community sphere:

All Christians are implicitly threatened by the Islamic society in Yemen, and in particular by AQAP and IS. This naturally deters Christians making their religion known in public in any way. Since conversion is officially considered to be illegal, if found out, Christians with a Muslim background are forced by the local Islamic community to report their conversion to the authorities. Female converts are still considered to be Muslims and are expected to wear a veil. They also run the risk of being forced into marriage or house-arrest if their new faith is discovered. In the current humanitarian crisis, converts from Islam are additionally vulnerable in their communities as emergency relief is mostly distributed through Muslim employees of secular organizations and local mosques, which are allegedly discriminating against all who are not considered to be pious Muslims. Also, there is a high level of nepotism. This is a serious threat to the survival of Christians and other non-Muslims.

National sphere:

Muslims have more rights than the followers of other religions. The country abides by the strictest interpretations of Islam. Conversion out of Islam is forbidden by Islam and by state law. Converts may face the death penalty (though generally not implemented by the government but rather by radical Muslims, with the government turning a blind eye) if their new faith is discovered. Though focusing most of their attention on political events, government officials reportedly continued their efforts to intimidate Christians even amidst the chaotic war situation. Oppression has mostly been felt coming from Islamic militants who have had more freedom to operate in. This insecurity caused by radical Islamic movements makes Yemen very unstable. Currently, Christians are suffering especially from lawlessness in the country, and from Shiite rebels or groups affiliated with al-Qaeda or IS that are in control of large parts of the

country. All Christians are believed to be under surveillance by radical Muslims and can also become a specific target for these Islamic militant groups.

Church sphere:

All four official church buildings in Yemen, all located in Aden, which served expatriate Christians or refugees (mainly Ethiopian), have been damaged as a result of the war (including targeted attacks). There are no functioning church buildings left. As converts are not allowed to have their own gatherings, they meet in secret locations. Proselytism of Muslims is illegal; Bible training, publishing and importing Bibles (including other Christian materials) in Arabic are next to impossible.

Violence:

Contrary to last year, there were no reports of Christians being killed or detained without trial for their faith. Also, there were no reported incidents of churches or Christian building closed or attacked. The few church buildings in the country remain closed, after being attacked previously in both civil war and persecution related contexts. The local situation is very chaotic due to the civil war making violent incidents against Christians highly underreported. Several times local Christians have escaped death by moving to other places.

- At least 20 converts from Islam were mentally abused – which included death threats - because of their faith and because of the war. Some trauma care has been offered in the country.
- At least 10 convert families, composed in total of approximately 70 persons, had to be relocated inside the country for faith related reasons. However, Yemenis who are practicing their Christian faith in fellowship with other local believers remain strong.
- One Christian family with a Muslim background fled the country because of religious persecution. When converts leave the country, this is often because they are isolated and not aware of the presence of a national community of Christians with a Muslim background which could have helped them to relocate and remain safe.
- During a large part of the WWL 2018 reporting period, Indian Salesian priest Fr Tom Uzhunnali continued to be abducted. He was taken by assailants during the attack on the Catholic home for elderly and disabled in March 2016. In September 2017 he was released.

Gender profile of persecution

Female:

In a culture where the oppression of women is normal, female Christians with a Muslim background are additionally vulnerable. Tribal law and customs do not allow them to marry a Christian; punishment for disobedience can be death, banishment, or confinement within the home. In a public case reported in local papers, a young woman whose faith in Christ was discovered was committed to an asylum for the mentally ill. Female converts are also likely to be married off to a Muslim if their conversion is known. The local community of converts is reacting to this situation by arranging marriages with other Christians of

Muslim background. Female converts may also risk rape or sexual harassment. As such, female converts usually continue to wear the local Muslim dress for their own safety and security. In comparison to men, female seekers and new believers face greater limitations in accessing discipleship training, fellowship with other believers, and opportunities to get baptized —unless they have a close male relative who can facilitate their participation in these activities. This is because families closely monitor the activities of female members of the household outside the home, whereas men can come and go without giving an account of how their time was spent outside the home.

Male:

Although women face greater access restrictions to opportunities for discipleship, fellowship, and baptism, men face a greater risk of martyrdom. While women may be confined to the home, forced to marry a Muslim fundamentalist, beaten, or committed to an asylum for the mentally ill, they are less likely to be killed if their faith is discovered by family members or local authorities. This is due to an assumption that women are ignorant or mentally inferior, so they are considered less accountable for their error in judgement. Meanwhile men are more likely to be targeted by extremist groups, imprisoned by the local authorities, and are generally more likely to face persecution in the public sphere. Since women are already restricted by their gender from participation in the workforce, workplace discrimination or persecution particularly affects male converts. This also affects their families, since men are usually the sole provider for the household. A man whose wife is not a believer may be less likely to share his faith with others, as he fears his children will be raised as Muslims should his witness lead to his death or should he lose custody of his children in the case of divorce.

Future outlook

The war in Yemen has led to higher levels of violence and lawlessness, a situation which is liable to increase the oppression of minorities, including Christians. According to a leader of a NGO active in the country, wherever the Saudi-led coalition forces have dominated or freed areas, the local Christians were often targeted by radical Sunnis as a consequence.

On a political level, the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) does not foresee the conclusion of a peace deal in the short run, especially since the “rebel alliance between the Houthis and former president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, has broken down, resulting in fighting in the capital, Sanaa, and the death of Mr Saleh.”⁹² A continued stalemate is expected, especially as the Houthis now control most of Sanaa. Adding to the complexity of the conflict, is the rise of secessionist sentiment in the south which is likely to lead to further conflict. Meanwhile the poorest country of the Middle East finds itself in the middle of a devastating humanitarian catastrophe from which it will take a long time to recover. For now, with the fighting likely to intensify, the humanitarian crisis could get worse.

⁹² See: <http://country.eiu.com/Default.aspx?country=Yemen>, last accessed 11 December 2017.

In a situation of war and anarchy, the persecution engine *Organized corruption and crime* is flourishing, and given the current circumstances this engine is only expected to develop further. EIU analysts expect radical Islamic militants to “remain a threat throughout 2017-21”.⁹³ Whereas the persecution engine *Ethnic antagonism* has fueled the war in Yemen, the conflict is also likely to force people to rely on their own tribes even more, which as a result increases the pressure on and monitoring of Christians. Nationwide, sectarian and tribal divides are deepening which are an important barrier to peace and stability.

As Islamic militants are an important driver of the main persecution engine *Islamic oppression* in Yemen, this does not bode well for the situation of religious freedom among Yemen’s religious minorities, notably its Christians. The situation is particularly delicate as the majority of the Christian community (weakened by the leaving of expatriate Christians) consists of indigenous Christians from a Muslim background. On the other hand, amidst the insecurity of war, it is reported that more Muslims are turning to Christ than ever before.

Policy considerations

Open Doors recommends:

- The international community should put the issue of religious freedom and the protection of religious minorities on the agenda of future peace negotiations and should systematically raise this issue in bilateral discussions.
- The international community should highlight the human tragedy caused by the Yemeni conflict, place it high on its agenda and increase the necessary humanitarian assistance. The vulnerability of Christians as targets of the warring Islamic militants should be of particular concern.
- The international community should work together with both the de facto government and the exiled government of Yemen to restore the rule of law and stability in the country.
- The growing influence of various Islamist groups (mainly al-Qaeda but also Islamic State and Shia radical groups) in Yemen is a source of concern. The international community should closely monitor the situation in the country and hold regional powers such as Saudi Arabia and Iran accountable for the role they play in the country and urge them to cease their support of the violence, and work to prevent the empowerment of groups with a radical agenda who are seeking to take advantage of the anarchic situation in Yemen.

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⁹³ See: <http://country.eiu.com/yemen>, last accessed 4 September 2017.

10. Iran

Reporting period: 1 November 2016 - 31 October 2017

Position on World Watch List (WWL)

WWL 2018 Points: 85 / Position: 10

WWL 2017 Points: 85 / Position: 8

WWL 2016 Points 83 / Position: 9

Iran remains in the Top Ten of WWL 2018 with no change to the scored level of persecution compared to WWL 2017. The Iranian government continues to crack down on Christian convert communities in its goal of creating an Islamic state based on Shia Islam, in continuation of the Islamic Revolution⁹⁴ of 1979. It is actively trying to expand the influence of Shia Islam in the region and utilizes international diplomacy, economic incentives, and even military intervention to achieve this. The use of violence, even against their own nationals, combined with this strong ideology creates a totalitarian state. Christians (with their perceived Western influence) and other minorities are seen as a serious threat to national security and are hence targeted by the government.

Persecution engines

Persecution engines ⁹⁵	
Islamic oppression	Very strong
Religious nationalism	Strong
Ethnic antagonism	Weak
Denominational protectionism	Weak
Communist and post-Communist oppression	Not at all
Secular intolerance	Very weak
Dictatorial paranoia	Very strong
Organized corruption and crime	Strong

Islamic oppression (Very strong)

Shia Islam is the official state religion and all laws must be consistent with the official interpretation of Sharia law. The constitution bans the parliament from passing laws contrary to Islam and states there may be no amendment to its provisions related to the “Islamic character” of the political or legal system or to

⁹⁴ Calling the Iranian Revolution of 1979 the “Islamic Revolution” can be misleading. Although it fits very well with the regime’s narrative of the events, it was not just people with an Islamic (Shiite) agenda who were involved in the coup against the Shah. Communists, for example, played a role as well. After the Revolution, other groups have been sidelined and saw many of their members killed by the new regime.

⁹⁵ The scale for the level of influence of Persecution engines and Drivers in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong.

the specification of Shia Jafari Islam as the official religion. To safeguard Islamic ordinances and to ensure the compatibility with Islam of legislation passed by the parliament, a Guardian Council consisting of Shia scholars and clerics must review and approve all legislation. The Guardian Council also reviews all candidates for the highest public appointments, like the presidency and the parliament.⁹⁶ This explains why even the reformists within the government are conservative and why Christians and other religious minorities are barred from high office and other influential positions within the system.

Dictatorial paranoia (Very strong)

The zeal to maintain power is blended with Islamic oppression. The Islamic regime aims to protect the values of the Islamic Revolution of 1979 above all. Christianity is considered a condemnable Western influence and a constant threat to the Islamic identity of the Republic. Only the historical communities of Armenians and Assyrians are seen as Christian by the regime, although they are treated as second class citizens as well. Any other form of Christianity is treated as a dangerous Western influence, which explains why many Christians, especially converts from Islam to Christianity, are convicted for crimes against national security.

Religious nationalism (Strong)

This engine is strong within the Iranian government. In their view, ethnic Persians are by definition Muslim, and therefore ethnic Persian Christians are considered apostates. This makes almost all Christian activity illegal, especially when it occurs in the Persian language - be it evangelism, Bible training, publishing Christian books or preaching in Persian. Iranian society is much less fanatic than its leadership. This is partly the result of the widespread influence of more moderate and mystical Sufi Islam, as well as the pride of the Iranian people about the pre-Islamic Persian culture.

Organized corruption and crime (Strong)

Imprisoned Christians – especially converts – are sometimes offered to be released on bail. This often involves large amounts of money – reportedly varying between 2,000 and 200,000 USD, forcing the Christians or their families to hand over title deeds of homes and sometimes businesses. Persons released on bail do not always know how long their property will be retained. This uncertainty can silence them due to fear of losing their families' property. The Iranian regime puts pressure (sometimes with threats) on active Christians who were arrested for their house-church or evangelistic activities to leave the country and hence forfeit their bail.

Drivers of persecution

Drivers of persecution in Iran	
Government officials at any level from local to national	Very strong
Ethnic group leaders	Weak
Non-Christian religious leaders at any level from local to national	Very strong
Christian religious leaders at any level from local to national	Weak

⁹⁶ Iran 2016 International Religious Freedom Report, U.S. Department of State, p. 6.

Violent religious groups	Strong
Ideological pressure groups	Not at all
Normal citizens (people from the general public), including mobs	Weak
Own (extended) family	Medium
Political parties at any level from local to national	Strong
Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups	Very strong
Organized crime cartels or networks	Not at all
Multilateral organizations (e.g. UN) and embassies	Not at all

Drivers of Islamic oppression

Government officials are responsible for the many arrests and sentencing of Christians, especially converts from Islam. Non-Christian religious leaders (e.g. local Muslim clerics) sometimes incite violence against minority groups. Although Iranian society is moderate compared to its leadership, families will often put pressure on family members converting from Islam to Christianity.

Drivers of Religious nationalism

The current Iranian political spectrum is basically a division between the Islamic left (Reformists) and the Islamic right ([Principlists](#))⁹⁷. The Reformists dominate the parliament, the Islamic Consultative Assembly. Re-elected president Rouhani can also be seen as a Reformist. However, the Principlists dominate the Guardian Council, which has the power to veto all legislation from the parliament. The appointments of the Guardian Council are controlled by the supreme leader of Iran (who has highest authority in the country) and is a Principlist himself. In this way, the moderate parliament of Iran does not have much power to bring change. As long as the right wing sees Iran as an Islamic country for Shiite Muslims, threatened by Western (Christian) countries and culture, Christians, especially converts, will be persecuted.

The Principlists strengthen their support base through the Revolutionary Guard's volunteer militia, the *Basij*, for example. This a fanatical right wing paramilitary group that is well-known for its loyalty to the supreme leader. The militia has offices and bases all over the country, securing support for the Principlists and acting violently against all enemies of the state if called upon, including Christians.

Drivers of Dictatorial paranoia

State security services monitor all Christian groups closely, even the officially recognized historical communities of Armenian and Assyrian Christians. Through this close monitoring and arrest of those involved in evangelization, the government applies pressure to ensure that no Christian is involved in proselytizing Muslims.

⁹⁷ See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iranian_Principlists, last accessed 1 December 2017.

Drivers of *Organized corruption and crime*

The government uses the bail-system in such a way that it is purposely impoverishing prosecuted Christians and encouraging them to leave the country (see above). It has been reported that some government officials use the system to enrich themselves.⁹⁸

Context

Recent history saw at least two remarkable developments on the political scene in Iran. In July 2015 an agreement was made between Iran and six world powers aiming to restrict the Iranian nuclear program in exchange for the lifting of sanctions. This deal was struck during the first term of President Rouhani, who is known as a moderate. The victories for the moderates in the elections to the Iranian Parliament and to the Assembly of Experts⁹⁹ in February 2016, as well as the re-election of President Rouhani in May 2017 seems to underline the rise of moderate politics in Iran.

The nuclear deal is likely to lead to a richer and stronger Iran, whose influence in the region will grow further. On a domestic level, the deal is not expected to lead to an improvement in terms of human rights in general or more specifically religious freedom. On the contrary, it could well lead to a stricter situation, as conservative elements of the Iranian political spectrum aim to suppress all elements that are considered a threat to the Islamic character of the regime. This includes Iranians with ties to the West but also religious minorities such as Christians and adherents of Baha'i.

Furthermore, one of the major issues is the internal power play within the Iranian government, which makes it difficult to reform the economy. Article 44 of the Iranian Constitution prescribes “that all major industries should be government owned”.¹⁰⁰ In May 2005, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei provided an important new interpretation of this article, allowing more privatization and a decrease of the state sector. Instead of private companies, the very conservative Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) used this opportunity to build its own in-state economic empire. As the IRGC is very well connected to the judiciary and other state branches, it has become almost impossible for moderate President Rouhani to carry out major reforms.

No Christian has been killed by the regime for many years, most probably out of fear of the ensuing international consequences. Many dissidents from other groups have been executed - mainly on charges of terrorism (instead of “apostasy”). Besides Christians, Bahai, Sunni, Sufi (Dervish) Muslims and other religious minorities, also ethnic minorities, like the Kurds, Baloch and Iranian Arabs face suspicion and persecution from the government.

⁹⁸ See: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/iran-blog/2016/nov/28/iranian-judicial-authorities-attempt-arrest-of-mp-mahmoud-sadeghi>, last accessed on 1 December 2017.

⁹⁹ The Assembly of Experts is the directly elected body that designates and dismisses the supreme leader. However, the supreme leader himself controls the nomination and appointment of its members.

¹⁰⁰ See: <https://en.radiofarda.com/a/iran-larjani-slams-economic-performance/28637552.html>, last accessed on 26 July 2017.

Christian communities and how they are affected

Communities of expatriate Christians:

This group consists of Christian expatriates from the Far East (e.g. Philippines, South Korea) and the West, of whom many have a Catholic, Lutheran or Presbyterian background. Some expatriate churches have been forced to shut down after local converts with an Islamic background started attending. Joint annual prayer meetings between church leaders of different denominations were also cancelled in the past due to pressure from Iran's security apparatus.

Historical Christian communities:

Historical ethnic Christian minorities such as the Armenian and Assyrian Christians are relatively free to practice their belief. They are allowed to preach to fellow countrymen in their own language, but it is forbidden to minister to people with a Muslim background (speaking Persian) or have them attend church services. Although formally recognized and protected by law, they are treated as second-class citizens. Besides this, they will face imprisonment, physical abuse, harassment and discrimination when reaching out to Muslims.

Communities of converts to Christianity:

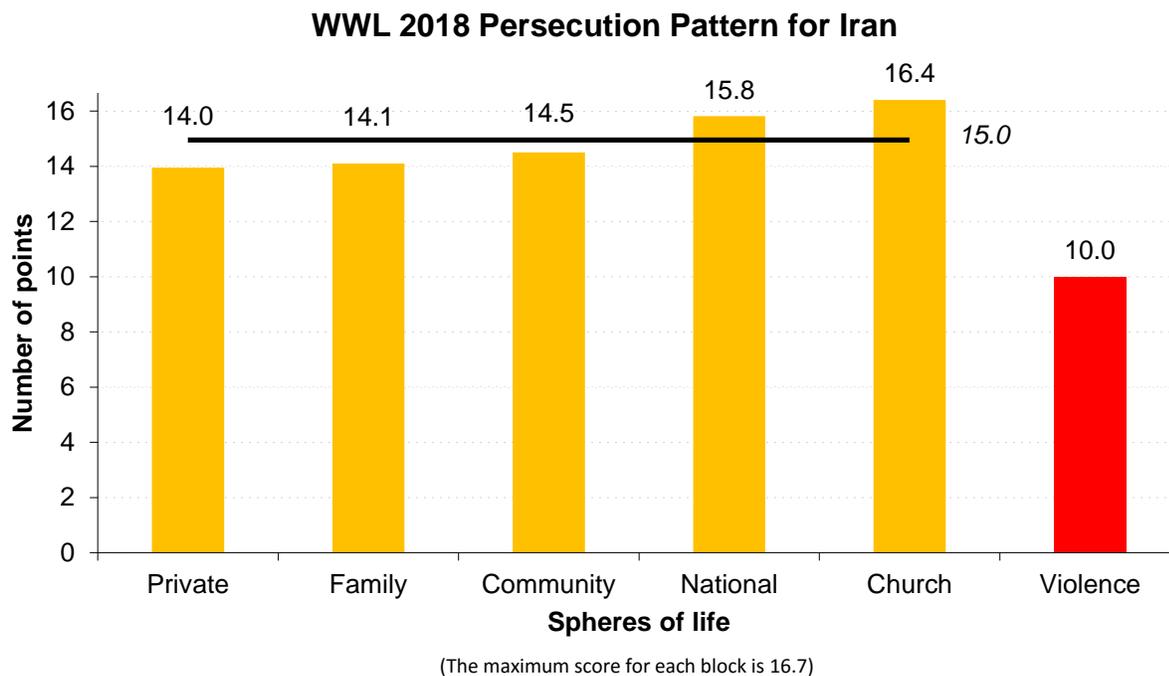
Converts from Islam to Christianity constitute probably the biggest group. They bear the brunt of persecution, especially by the government and to a lesser extent by their (extended) families and society. In contrast to the historical churches, the government sees them as an attempt by Western countries to undermine Islam and the Islamic regime of Iran.¹⁰¹ Baptism is seen as a public declaration of one's conversion to Christianity and thus denunciation of Islam and is therefore forbidden. Also, the majority of children born to converts are automatically registered as Muslims. It is especially the leaders of Christian convert groups who have been arrested, prosecuted and have received long prison terms for crimes against the national security, although since 2014 an increasing number of non-leaders have received similar charges too. Due to such high pressure, converts have to be very careful and many of them practice their faith isolated from other Christians. There is also a growing community of Iranian Christian converts worldwide, as over the years many converts have fled the country and other Iranians have become Christians abroad.

Non-traditional Christian communities:

Although it is difficult to make a sharp distinction between this category and the communities of converts, there are Christians belonging to Evangelical, Baptist and Pentecostal communities. They often have an Armenian, Assyrian, Jewish or a Zoroastrian background. Others include the children and grandchildren of converts from Islam. They face the same severe persecution from the government and are discriminated against by society, especially if they engage in any evangelistic or house-church activities.

¹⁰¹ See: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2016/12/iran-church-retreat-centre-confiscated-for-being-funded-by-cia/>, last accessed 4 September 2016.

Pressure in the 5 spheres of life and violence



The Persecution pattern shows:

- The average pressure on Christians in Iran remained at the extreme level of 15 points, not changing in comparison to the WWL 2017 reporting period.
- Pressure remained at an extreme level in all spheres of life but is strongest where Christian life becomes public: i.e. in the *Church* and *National spheres*. This indicates something of the difference between regime and society: the former being more radical than the nominal Iranian citizen is.
- The score for violence went down from 10.2 in WWL 2017 to 10.0. The Iranian government remains very oppressive and keeps detaining, sentencing and imprisoning many Christians, but in the WWL 2018 reporting period no incidents of forced marriage were officially reported. However, as one country researcher remarked: “This is so common that it is hardly reported as a persecution incident.”

Private sphere:

Converts from Islam to Christianity cannot openly practice their faith. Any hint that they may be Christians can have serious consequences. If they are the only believers in their family, they have to be very careful in the way they worship. For all types of Christianity, it can be dangerous to possess Christian materials in Persian (Farsi) – especially if it concerns significant quantities as this would suggest they are for distribution to Muslim background Iranians. Christians from Historic Christian communities can possess Christian materials in their language (Armenian or Assyrian) without fear.

Family sphere:

For a Muslim family, it is a great disgrace when one of its members leaves Islam. In the case of inheritances and custody of children in divorces, Christians are often discriminated against if family members are Muslims. For example, a non-Muslim cannot inherit from a Muslim. Besides this, a Muslim man is free to marry a non-Muslim woman. However, the opposite does not apply. A marriage between a non-Muslim man and a Muslim woman is not even recognized. In addition, in school, children of Christians with a Muslim background are considered Muslims and are obliged to attend Islamic classes. In post-secondary education all Christians are forced to take Islamic courses.

Community sphere:

All Christians in Iran are more or less put under pressure to renounce their faith as a result of discrimination. Christians with a Muslim background are considered unclean especially in villages, rural areas and in conservative cities. Radical Islamic people will not shake hands with Christians, touch them or eat their food. All types of Christianity - and particularly converts if their new faith is known - can experience harassment and discrimination in their workplace, both by the state and by private sector employers.

National sphere:

Any Muslim who leaves Islam faces the death penalty. However, the only person who has been executed under apostasy laws was Rev. Hossein Soodmand in 1990. After that, there was international pressure on the regime and there were no further executions for apostasy. The regime's focus is on those reaching out to converts and even well-established Christian denominations are not safe from harassment if they are active in ministering to Muslims: their members are then questioned by the police, arrested, put in jail and beaten. Many (if not all) public church services are monitored by the secret police. Hate speech against Iranian Christians, especially Protestants, increased during the WWL 2018 reporting period in the form of multimedia material published by the government and anti-Christian rhetoric expressed by imams.

Church sphere:

The government has further intensified its campaign to remove Persian-speaking Christians from the country. During the past years, many churches have been shut down, confiscated or forced to cancel their church services in Persian. Their leaders were also often arrested. Congregations that are still gathering in churches are not allowed to accept new members with a Muslim background and their current members are aging. Severe surveillance on house-churches leads to increasing fear among those attending. Evangelism, Bible training and the publishing and importing of Bibles in Farsi are all illegal.

Violence:

During the WWL 2018 reporting period, most violence against Christians came from the government; at least 52 Christians were arrested. Especially converts from Islam to Christianity actively involved in the proselytization of Muslims endured the most persecution. Houses of (convert) Christians were raided and

many converts received long prison sentences.¹⁰² The government also continued their policy of impoverishing imprisoned Christians by demanding unreasonably high bail amounts.¹⁰³

Gender profile of persecution

Female:

The Tahirih Justice Center reports that women and girls are especially vulnerable in the Iranian society because they are depending on their husbands and guardians.¹⁰⁴ There is little protection against (sexual) abuse and domestic violence. Furthermore, the issue of honor and shame is an important element within Iranian society. Thus, a woman's conversion and arrest is often more shameful to families than when male members leave Islam. Nonetheless, more women than men are converting to Christianity in Iran. The number of female Christian converts arrested and detained has risen ever since the state started targeting ordinary church members and not just leaders. However, the number of detentions are lower than for men. One reason could be that issuing prison sentences to women can have negative international consequences for the Iranian regime, since people tend to have more sympathy for female detainees.

Male:

In the WWL 2018 reporting period, more men were arrested, prosecuted and sentenced by the government than women. Men tend to have more leadership positions within the various (underground) churches, although sources say house-churches are often lead by women too.

Future outlook

The conservative elements known as Principalists within the Iranian government (see above) fear for their position and fear any violation of the values of the Islamic Revolution of 1979. It is likely that they will try to counter the current more moderate development by blocking any attempts to implement social and political reform. Another way of getting the message across that the nuclear deal does not mean an end to the values of the revolution, is a crackdown on media, human rights and political activists. Already, the suppression on Iranians holding dual nationality and dissidents including religious minorities has increased. These groups are considered a threat to the Islamic character of the republic. The first because of their connections to foreign circles and businesses, and the latter because of their political or religious convictions. Part of this suppression is reflected in the increased number of arrests but also smear campaigns against religious minorities, especially Christians and Baha'is.

¹⁰² For example: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2017/11/iran-christian-convert-loses-appeal-10-year-sentence-missionary-activities/>, last accessed 1 December 2017. For more examples, see: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/countries/iran/>.

¹⁰³ For example: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/coe/iranian-christian-convert-released-bail-days-threat-indefinite-incarceration/>, last accessed 1 December 2017. For more examples, see: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/countries/iran/>.

¹⁰⁴ See: <https://preventforcedmarriage.org/forced-marriage-overseas-iran/>, last accessed 6 December 2017.

When more interactions with the wider world become possible, security services are also likely to monitor these more intensively. As a result, religious minorities like Baha'is and Christians are likely to be more closely watched - especially for contacts with Western co-religionists. Already, Christian Persian speaking media are reported to be more closely watched. In a way, the nuclear deal has further escalated an internal political power-struggle in Iran. In this struggle, which is not expected to cease in the short run, the re-election of moderate president Rouhani in May 2017 over the very conservative candidate supported by the Supreme Leader seems to mean that the majority of the Iranian society is supporting the 'reformists'

Because of the huge power base of the Principalists, like the powerful military and security organization commissioned to protect the regime, Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps – IRGC and their connections with the judiciary, the outcome of the internal power struggle is uncertain. Things are changing in Iran. At least on paper, such developments could have a positive outcome for Christians and other minorities in the long term, but for now persecution is at an extreme level.

Policy considerations

Open Doors recommends that:

- The international community, taking advantage of the improved diplomatic relations with the West, should urge the government of Iran to recognize all minority religions as full citizens before the law enjoying their full human rights including the ethnic Persian believers.
- The human rights situation should be addressed in the contact between Iran and Western countries, especially now more and more Western business are investing in Iran, with a mainstreamed emphasis on Freedom of Religion or Belief. The increasing frequency of multimedia hate campaigns should be denounced and penalized.
- The international community should hold the Iranian government accountable to uphold these international and constitutional commitments to protect the freedom of Christians in its territories. Closing churches, appropriating church property, arresting church leaders and threatening churchgoers are violations of Freedom of Religion or Belief proscribed in Article 18 of the ICCPR, to which Iran is a signatory. Article 13 of Iran's Constitution says Zoroastrians, Jews and Christians are recognized religious minorities free to perform religious rites and ceremonies. Article 23 of Iran's Constitution says: "investigation of individuals' beliefs is forbidden, and no one may be molested or taken to task simply for holding a certain belief."
- At least 52 Christians were arrested in the WWL 2018 reporting period, many have been imprisoned and faced physical and psychological torture during interrogation. The international community should press for the immediate release of the prisoners and legal justice for violence committed in prisons.

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11. India

Reporting period: 1 November 2016 - 31 October 2017

Position on World Watch List (WWL)

WWL 2018 Points: 81 / Position: 11

WWL 2017 Points: 73 / Position: 15

WWL 2016 Points: 68 / Position: 17

With a score of 81 points, India ranks 11th on the WWL 2018. This is a rise of 8 points compared to WWL 2017. The extreme level of violence (and the constant increase in the number of violent incidents) is having a serious effect on all *Spheres of life*, causing a rise in pressure on Christians in India. This is mainly due to the impact of intolerant Hindu radicals, with Maoists and Muslims adding to the pressure in the background.

Persecution engines

Persecution engines ¹⁰⁵ in India	
Islamic oppression	Weak
Religious nationalism	Very strong
Ethnic antagonism	Weak
Denominational protectionism	Very weak
Communist and post-Communist oppression	Weak
Secular intolerance	Not at all
Dictatorial paranoia	Not at all
Organized corruption and crime	Weak

Religious nationalism (Very strong):

The assertiveness and aggressiveness of all kinds of Hindu organizations have increased over the years. They claim that India belongs to Hinduism and that other religions should be driven out of the country. Radical Hinduism is by far the main persecutor in India. It is vocal, omnipresent and very violent. Other forms of *Religious nationalism* in India further worsen the score, e.g. from various radical groups such as Radical Buddhists in Ladakh, forms of Neo-Buddhism in Maharashtra and Uttar Pradesh, and Radical Sikhs in Punjab.

¹⁰⁵ The scale for the level of influence of Persecution engines and Drivers in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong.

Drivers of persecution

Drivers of persecution in India	
Government officials at any level from local to national	Strong
Ethnic group leaders	Strong
Non-Christian religious leaders at any level from local to national	Very strong
Christian religious leaders at any level from local to national	Very weak
Violent religious groups	Very strong
Ideological pressure groups	Not at all
Normal citizens (people from the general public), including mobs	Very strong
Own (extended) family	Medium
Political parties at any level from local to national	Very strong
Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups	Medium
Organized crime cartels or networks	Weak
Multilateral organizations (e.g. UN) and embassies	Not at all

The most powerful drivers of *Religious nationalism* in India are *Non-Christian religious leaders*, *Violent religious groups*, *Normal citizens* and *Political parties*. Secondary drivers are: *Government officials and Ethnic group leaders*. The combination of these drivers poses huge problems for Christians as they experience violence from:

- Local radical Hindu groups - e.g. Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), Shiv Sena and Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP);
- Angry mobs of villagers (instigated by Hindu clergy).

Both of these groups attack Christians, but the violence is not stopped by local, state or national authorities, which are often dominated by the radical Hindu party, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). This means that Hindu radicals can act with increasing impunity.

Context

The centuries' old caste system is so deeply entrenched in the Indian psyche that it is almost impossible to get rid of it. Even belief systems that do not acknowledge the caste system but doctrinally teach the equality of human beings are marred by the same system they fight against. Islam, Sikhism and Christianity are examples of this. Although the government has outlawed it, the mistreatment of the lower castes and untouchables (Dalits and Tribals) continues. Several observers even speak of a "racist" system.

Since May 2014 India is governed by a Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government, led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. As a result, radical Hinduism, which was already present under the previous government, has increased steadily. While the level of intolerance increased, and minorities were regularly attacked, the central government has refused to speak out against the atrocities – thus further encouraging the radical Hindus to step up their actions. The level of impunity is increasing and the number of violent attacks against Christians has reached alarming levels.

Since the second half of 2014 Hindu radicals launched a “home-coming” campaign (a.k.a. Ghar Vapsi), designed to lure Muslims and Christians back to the Hindu fold. Several campaigns have been held in which hundreds of people returned to Hinduism. The Ghar Vapsi campaign reached its peak in 2015 and early 2016.

Hindu radicals have called both Islam and Christianity foreign religions which should eventually be thrown out of the country. Therefore, Muslims experience similar treatment as Christians do at the hands of Hindu extremists.

Christian communities and how they are affected

Communities of expatriate Christians:

There are several expatriate groups active in India. It is not only Westerners living in India who have their own congregations, but also refugees. One example is the Afghan community that has a congregation in New Delhi. Most of the time, these congregations do not draw the ire of the radical Hindus in India. There are two reasons for this: They have a very distinct ethnic membership, and they are not very active in outreach among Indian nationals.

Historical Christian communities:

These communities (e.g. the Roman Catholic, Orthodox and Anglican-based churches) bear witness that Christians have been in India for many centuries. The first Christians came to India in the 3rd century AD. This is when the (Orthodox) Kerala Mar Thoma Church was established. These churches are not growing very fast because they are hardly active in outreach. Still, even this group of Christians is sometimes attacked by radical Hindus who vandalize churches, Jesus statues, grottos and crucifixes.

Communities of converts to Christianity:

Christian converts from a Hindu background bear the brunt of the persecution in India. These believers face harassment on an almost daily basis and are constantly under pressure to return to Hinduism. They are often physically assaulted, hospitalized and sometimes even killed. They live mostly in the countryside, where they face societal pressure not only from family, friends, community and local Hindu priests, but also from radical Hindus.

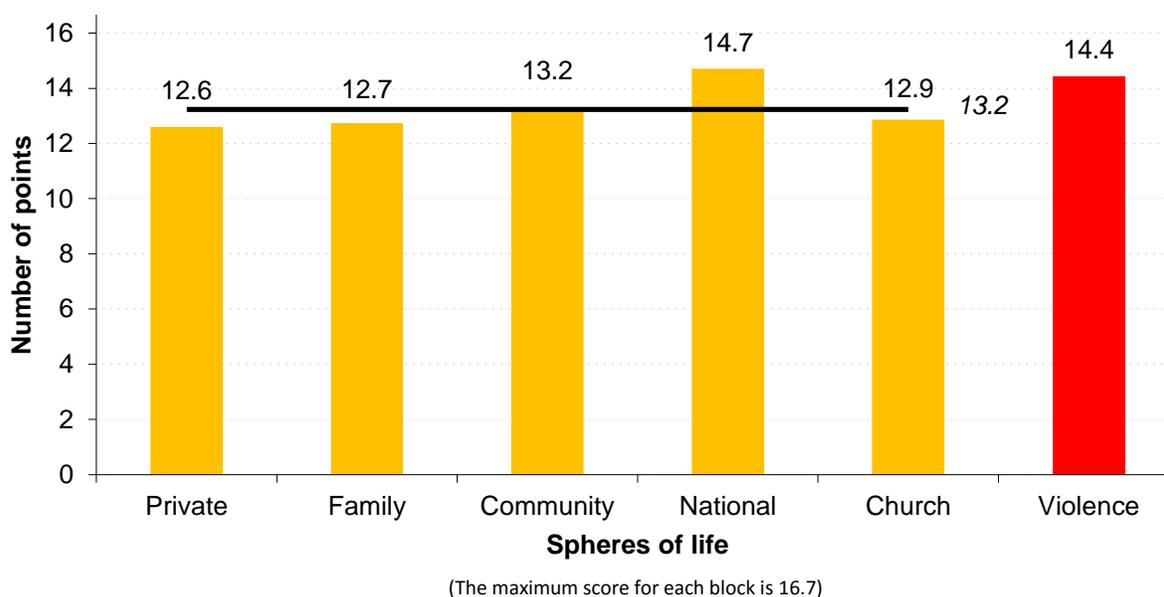
Other converts (from Islam, Sikhism and Buddhism) also face pressure from their social environment, but their numbers are far smaller. Christians with a Muslim background face persecution only in areas where there is a high concentration of Muslims in the local population.

Non-traditional Christian communities:

After converts, Christians from Baptist, Evangelical and Pentecostal churches are regarded as the second main target by radical Hindus because of their involvement in outreach activities and conversion and face regular attack.

Pressure in the 5 spheres of life and violence

WWL 2018 Persecution Pattern for India



The Persecution pattern for India shows:

- Overall, the pressure on Christians in India is very high. The average pressure has increased from 11.5 in WWL 2017 to 13.2.
- Pressure is extreme in the *National sphere of life* with a score of 14.7 points, and is very high in all other *spheres of life*. *Religious nationalism* is the leading persecution engine and it is present in all *spheres of life*.
- The score for violence has risen from 13.5 in WWL 2017 to 14.4. This is a clear indication that violence against Christians in India is at an extreme level and is having a major impact in all areas of life (see below). India has one of the highest scores for violent incidents in the entire WWL 2018.

Private sphere:

Conversion is not only socially opposed but also by law. Currently, anti-conversion laws are in force in six states: Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Himachal Pradesh, Jharkhand and Gujarat. When believers are suspected of outreach activities, their homes are often raided by both non-state actors and police if they receive a complaint. Materials found are destroyed or confiscated. Identifying oneself as a Christian can be risky and vicious threats through social media are commonplace. In the countryside, open signs of following a faith different to Hinduism (or Islam), will stimulate aggression as it will automatically be linked to evangelism or conversion. Private meetings for worship activities are not safe. Throughout the country local intelligence monitors all Christian activity. There has also been evidence that digital surveillance has been carried out on Christian leaders by Hindu radicals. Though the pressure on Christians is most evident

in rural and semi-urban areas, instances of the same have also been reported in cities like Delhi and Mumbai.

Family sphere:

Not only babies of Christians with a Hindu background, but also converts themselves were registered as Hindus during the 2011 census. It is quite difficult for converts and members of Protestant churches to hold a Christian wedding in their localities if radical Hindu groups are active there. Baptisms have been repeatedly hindered in villages, small towns and occasionally even in cities, especially at mass evangelistic and healing conventions. There have been cases reported from northern and central India of funerals of Christian converts being targeted by radical Hindus. In some cases they have forced family members to cremate the person according to Hindu rites. Christians cannot adopt children as per law. Christian children have been subjected to Yoga and *Surya Namaskar* (Sun Worship) at most major schools; attendance is compulsory. There have been instances in which Christians with a Hindu background have been attacked by their own parents and it has been alleged that some have even been killed by their parents. These incidents are never reported in mainstream media.

Community sphere:

Threats and obstructions for faith-related reasons have increased in intensity through the various radical Hindu hate campaigns and re-conversion movements across the country; this has become part of everyday life for all types of Christians. Christians who are part of a Hindu community cannot escape from certain obligations or standard ritual practices. Pressure to renounce the Christian faith comes from all the sides and is done very systematically; Hindu fundamentalists threaten believers with physical harm and Hindu priests try to indoctrinate Christians by broadcasting loud chanting and worship in the community. Social discrimination (sometimes organized) is very common against Christian employees both in government and private sectors, e.g. promotions are denied for frivolous reasons. The corruption in the system makes it worse.

National sphere:

A debate is in progress about implementing anti-conversion legislation at national level. Registering conversion to the Christian faith is hindered most in tribal areas. Christians are often discriminated against when dealing with the authorities. There are some Christians employed by local authorities, but if their boss is a Hindu nationalist, they may miss promotions. And those converting to Christianity may well lose their jobs. The media is dominated by over 90% Hindu high caste people and has always been biased against Christians. For Hindu political-religious groups, targeting independent pastors and church activists under the infamous "blasphemy" laws is the norm. Few have been punished for crimes against the Christian community – impunity has become the norm.

Church sphere:

Hindu groups monitor and disrupt churches regularly. The construction of new churches is often met with strong opposition in rural and even urban areas. Another issue is that many older church buildings cannot be renovated because of corruption and red-tape. Activities outside church premises are almost always understood to be efforts aiming at outreach and conversion. When Christians are attacked, the

perpetrators often focus on the leaders and pastors and beat them severely to make an example of them. The distribution of tracts and Bibles is hindered by local Hindu radicals in rural areas, and sometimes even in cities, as this is directly connected to outreach and conversion. India has not issued missionary visas since the late 1960s. Not only foreign Christian missionaries are not allowed in the country, but there are also ever increasing difficulties for foreign NGO workers and journalists to obtain visas. Acts of vandalism, desecration and the destruction of Christian symbols happen quite often, mainly in rural and semi-urban areas. Pastors and missionaries visiting churches have been routinely questioned by the police (together with hosts and participants).

Violence:

Persecution in India is extremely violent and the violence has increased compared to the previous reporting period. The number of reported incidents is very high, but it should be noted that this is just the tip of the iceberg – many incidents are not reported in the media or recorded by researchers. In the WWL 2018 reporting period, at least 8 Christians were killed for their faith and at least 34 (house) churches were attacked and damaged, while in Goa more than 100 graves were damaged. More than 600 Christians were detained in India. According to information from church partners, nearly 24,000 Christians were physically attacked. At least 14 houses or properties of Christians were attacked and damaged. At least 336 Christians were forced to flee their homes. In all cases the actual numbers will be much higher.

Some examples of violent incidents:

- On 15 July 2017 Pastor Sultan Masih was shot and killed in a drive-by shooting outside of his church in Ludhiana, Punjab. (Source: [International Christian Concern](#)¹⁰⁶)
- On 15 March 2017 US-based Christian charity Compassion International ended its activities in India after 48 years because of increasing governmental restrictions. The Ministry of Home Affairs accused the charity of funding Indian partners that were not registered to receive foreign funds. Ever since the pro-Hindu Bharatiya Janata Party came to power in 2014, Hindu groups have accused Christian charities of using their activities to convert Hindus. (Source: [UCAN](#)¹⁰⁷)
- On 10 May 2017 the police arrested six pastors at the house of a Christian in the village of Salempur (Uttar Pradesh) where they had gathered with approximately 250 Christians for a healing prayer service. The pastors belong to a non-traditional church and were charged with disturbance of the peace, creating hostility between religions and attempting to incite a riot. (Source: [UCAN](#)¹⁰⁸)

¹⁰⁶ See: <http://www.persecution.org/2017/07/17/pastor-shot-and-killed-in-drive-by-shooting-at-church-in-northern-india/>, last accessed 1 December 2017.

¹⁰⁷ See: <https://www.ucanews.com/news/christian-charity-for-children-shuts-operations-in-india/78654>, last accessed 1 December 2017.

¹⁰⁸ See: <https://www.ucanews.com/news/pastors-falsely-charged-granted-bail-in-northern-india/79289>, last accessed 1 December 2017.

Gender profile of persecution

Female:

The forms of persecution women and girls are particularly subject to are molestation, rape, physical and verbal abuse; attempted murder; being forced to participate in Hindu rituals; isolation for faith and expulsion from home/village. India is a religiously diverse and democratic society with a constitution that in theory provides legal equality for all citizens irrespective of their religion, sex, race, or caste and prohibits religion-based discrimination. However, the reality is far different. Other simultaneously existing laws are ancient traditions which are by nature patriarchal and exploitative of the weaker class of society. Bajrang Dal, the youth wing of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, has announced the launch of “bahu lao-beti bachao” campaign. Under it, they “protect Hindu boys who marry Muslim or Christian girls” and create awareness among Hindu families “to protect their girls from falling in love or getting married to Muslim or Christian boys”.

Male:

The forms of persecution Christian men and boys are particularly subject to are brutal beatings amounting to attempted murder; legal charges; arrest on charges; social discrimination. They are subjected to various forms of persecution such as: expulsion from home; social boycotts; being fined for conversion; denied drinking water; deprived of government benefits; false charges of forcing people to convert to Christianity; loss of assets.

Future outlook

Radical Hindu attackers are increasingly enjoying impunity when they harass Muslims or Christians. As a result, the level of fear and uncertainty among the majority of Christians in India is increasing too. The fact that the government is looking away when religious minorities are attacked, will cause an increase in violence in the coming years.

Policy considerations

- The international community should urgently integrate concern for religious freedom into bilateral and multilateral business contracts with India.
- The international community should put pressure on the Indian government to remove the Presidential order of 1950 that unconstitutionally excludes Christians (and Muslims) from privileges entitled to people from Scheduled Caste background.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁹ Indian law provides all people belonging to Scheduled Castes/tribes special rights and privileges for enhancing their position in society. Such rights and privileges are curtailed at once when a Scheduled Caste person changes his/her religion to Christianity.

- The central Indian government should press states that have adopted anti-conversion laws to repeal them. The states in question are Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Himachal Pradesh, Jharkhand and Gujarat.
- The Indian state governments should investigate and prosecute those who are responsible for the killings, raping and kidnapping of Christians.
- The Indian state governments should investigate the damage caused to churches and Christians' property after they have suffered attack. Additionally, special instructions should be given to the police and district administrations to insure the future safety of churches.

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12. Saudi Arabia

Reporting period: 1 November 2016 - 31 October 2017

Position on World Watch List (WWL)

WWL 2018 Points: 79 / Position: 12

WWL 2017 Points: 76 / Position: 14

WWL 2016 Points: 76 / Position: 14

With a score of 79 points, Saudi Arabia ranks 12 on WWL 2018. The increase of three points compared to WWL 2017 is mostly explained by an increase in the number of violent incidents against Christians which include a higher number of Christians arrested, house churches closed and Christians fleeing the country. The overall score for pressure on Christians remains more or less constant in Saudi Arabia, one of the world's few countries where church buildings are forbidden.

Persecution engines

Persecution engines in Saudi Arabia ¹¹⁰	
Islamic oppression	Very strong
Religious nationalism	Not at all
Ethnic antagonism	Very Strong
Denominational protectionism	Not at all
Communist and post-Communist oppression	Not at all
Secular intolerance	Not at all
Dictatorial paranoia	Strong

¹¹⁰ The scale for the level of influence of Persecution engines and Drivers in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong.

Organized corruption and crime	Not at all
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Islamic oppression (Very strong):

The desert kingdom is defined by Wahhabism, a purist and strict interpretation of Islam. It is forbidden to openly practice other religions. Saudi Arabia controls the Islamic holy cities of Mecca and Medina, which are the birth and burial places of Mohammed, the prophet of Islam. The Saudi government is combating Islamic militancy on a national level because it can be a threat to the reign of the royal family. However, private Saudi funds do support Islamic militant groups outside the country and are one of the main sources of Sunni armed conflict in the world, e.g. in Iraq and Syria. Saudi Arabia's legal system is based on Islamic law (Sharia). Apostasy – conversion to another religion – is punishable by death if the accused does not recant.

Ethnic antagonism (Very strong - blended with Islamic oppression):

Typical for this persecution engine is how it results in pressure being exerted to enforce on communities and households the continuing influence of age-old indigenous customs established by tribes or ethnic people groups. In the case of Saudi Arabia, ethnic antagonism is clearly mixed with Islam. This particularly affects Christians from a Muslim background.

Dictatorial paranoia:

The Saudi monarchy has supreme power and absolute authority. As such, the monarch can implement any law he desires as long as this complies with Sharia and the Quran. In an unexpected move, King Salman promoted his son to Crown Prince in June 2017. According to observers it was a move to preserve the monarchical ascendancy of the family rather than a focused vision for the country. The top two authorities of the land have implemented many changes that have affected expatriates in general, including Christians, although Christians are not thereby being specifically targeted. An example of this is the increase in visa fees for all dependents of expatriates.

Drivers of persecution

Drivers of persecution in Saudi Arabia	
Government officials at any level from local to national	Very Strong
Ethnic group leaders	Strong
Non-Christian religious leaders at any level from local to national	Strong
Christian religious leaders at any level from local to national	Not at all
Violent religious groups	Weak
Ideological pressure groups	Not at all
Normal citizens (people from the general public), including mobs	Strong
Own (extended) family	Very Strong
Political parties at any level from local to national	Not at all
Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups	Not at all
Organized crime cartels or networks	Not at all
Multilateral organizations (e.g. UN) and embassies	Very Weak

The following drivers of persecution are active on a medium, strong or very strong level in Saudi Arabia: government officials at any level from local to national, ethnic group leaders, non-Christian religious leaders at any level from local to national, normal citizens and family including extended family. Converts from Islam to Christianity are mostly suffering from pressure from their family and extended family, which can even include death threats, honor killings and permanent in-house detention. Government officials create and maintain a strict Islamic system that treats Christians as second class people and denies places of worship to any other religion than Islam. Islamic leaders also try to impose strict Islamic law on all people who come to Saudi Arabia, including Christians. Islamic leaders are also a problem to converts (who are still considered to be Muslims) as well as to low-paid foreign Christian workers who are continuously pressured to convert to Islam, particularly the ones living isolated from other Christians serving in Saudi homes. Finally “normal citizens” are especially a source of pressure for converts, since there are anti-Christian and anti-non-Islamic feelings among Saudi citizens in general.

Context

In only a matter of decades, Saudi Arabia has developed into one of largest exporters of petroleum worldwide. It is this development that has drawn large numbers of foreign workers to the country, including Christians. This economic success has created an economic interdependence with the West, since this is where the main consumer demand is found. This has led to strong political and military relationships, with a series of US military bases being allowed to continue operating in the country and a huge [arms deal](#) being signed in May 2017.¹¹¹ Since 2015, Saudi Arabia has been leading military intervention in Yemen’s civil war, reportedly in efforts to stabilize the Yemeni government, but considering the Saudi Arabian airstrikes on airports, ports, hospitals, schools, funerals (all causing the largest humanitarian catastrophe in the world today), it is more likely to be an effort to avert any possibility of its southern neighbor becoming Shiite-controlled.

In order to reduce its dependency on the petroleum industry, the Saudi kingdom is trying to diversify its economy and creating more jobs for Saudis, as set out in its ambitious plan for socio-economic reform entitled “Saudi Vision 2030”. Announced in April 2016, this strategy document also clearly underlines the Saudi kingdom’s proud Islamic identity and leading role in the Muslim world. Saudi Arabia is going through considerable social change. The Internet is playing an important role in this development, which could also lead to increased opportunities for online Christian ministry. Nevertheless, this development is likely to be coupled with higher levels of internet monitoring. In another effort to compensate the disappointing economy and to compensate the costs of war with Yemen, Saudi Arabia has increased visa fees for spouses and children of foreign workers. As this is becoming too costly, many low-paid Christian workers are leaving, which is affecting the church. Several church leaders are reporting that 20-25% of their congregation have already left the country. This will have a negative impact on the Christian community

¹¹¹ See: <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/05/19/politics/jared-kushner-saudi-arms-deal-lockheed-martin/index.html>, last accessed 15 September 2017.

in the country, causing a growing lack of church leaders and members. On the other hand, the number of converts with a Muslim or Hindu background seem to increase. However, this does not compensate the number of Christians leaving.

The increased role of the internet, social media and satellite TV has radically changed Saudi youth culture. As a result the gap between Saudi's large youth population and the ageing monarch is growing. The majority of the population is under thirty and they (especially women) are longing for more freedom without being restricted by the religious police. The decision to open election ballots for women (a legacy of late King Abdullah bin Abdul-Aziz Al Saud) and to [allow women drivers](#)¹¹² is a step forward in that respect. There is also a considerable degree of youth unemployment, partly caused by the weak education system and a lack of work zeal. These factors lead to widespread social discontent which can drive young people toward radical Islam. This is aggravated by a clearly divided society - the wealth of the elite versus the poverty of the masses. On the other hand, social discontent is not new - and has been bought off with large sums of money, for instance in the form of allocations for housing finance. Social dissatisfaction has been in existence for at least twenty years (including the civil disobedience of women driving, for instance). Moreover, the internet revolution has also reached Islamic leaders: Several imams have twitter accounts and have a large following. The number of Christian converts from Islam (and other religions) is increasing, along with their boldness in sharing their new faith.

Another major religious minority facing discrimination and persecution in Saudi Arabia are Shiite Muslims. Regarded as heretics by Saudi rulers for most of Saudi history up until today, Shiites are discriminated against in the justice system, education, government positions and religious activities. On the Shiite wish lists are greater political participation and more religious tolerance. Following sectarian tensions in the region, including the war against the Iran-backed rebels in Yemen, the Shiites' hope for tolerance and pluralism is fading.

Christian communities and how they are affected

Communities of expatriate Christians:

Most Christians in Saudi Arabia are expatriates who temporarily live and work in the country. These are Christians both from the Western world and from low and middle-income regions, such as India, the Philippines and Africa. Besides being exploited and poorly paid, Asian and African workers are regularly exposed to verbal and physical abuse because of their ethnicity and low status, as well as facing constant pressure to convert to Islam. Expatriate Christians are severely restricted in sharing their Christian faith with Muslims and in gathering for worship, which entails the risk of detention and deportation.

Historical Christian communities:

Indigenous historical Christian communities do not exist in Saudi Arabia.

¹¹² See: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-women-driving/rain-begins-with-a-single-drop-saudi-women-rejoice-at-end-of-driving-ban-idUSKCN1C217F>, last accessed 30 September 2017.

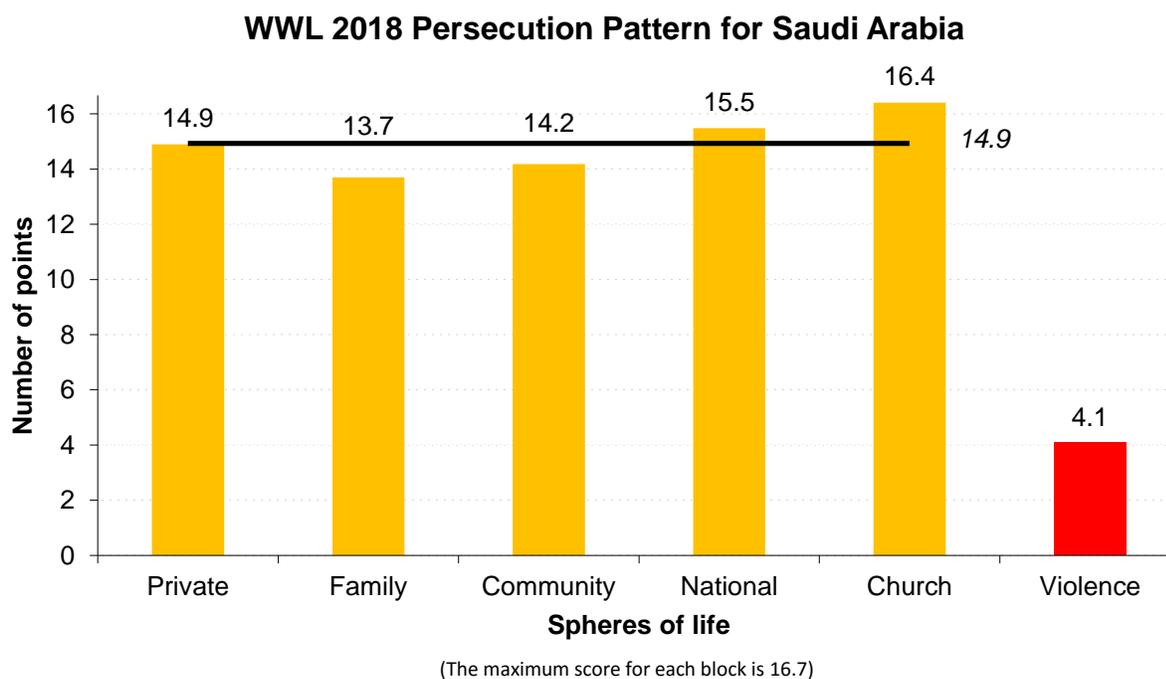
Communities of covert to Christianity:

Converts are mainly from a Muslim background. There are few Saudi converts in the country and they often live out their Christian faith in deepest secrecy. Many of them responded to Christian programs via satellite TV or became Christians after experiencing how God revealed Himself in a vision or a dream. Muslims have testified to joining the Hajj - the Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca – with a sincere desire to obey God and have received a divine vision showing them that they need Jesus. The Internet also plays a role as this allows access to Christian materials. This is limited, however, since the use of the Internet is strictly regulated by the authorities in Saudi Arabia. Nevertheless, the small number of Saudi converts has been increasing and they are also becoming bolder, sharing their Christian faith with others on the Internet and Christian satellite TV channels. This public sharing has often led to serious repercussions either from the family or authorities.

Non-traditional Christian communities:

Indigenous non-traditional Christian communities do not exist in Saudi Arabia.

Pressure in the 5 spheres of life and violence



The Persecution pattern shows:

- The average pressure on Christians remains stable at virtually the same extreme level (14.9 points) as in WWL 2017.
- The scores for pressure in all *Spheres of life* are at extreme levels, except for the score in the *Family sphere* which is at a very high level bordering on extreme. The *Family sphere* score is lowest due

to expatriate and migrant Christians experiencing hardly any or less pressure than indigenous converts from Islam in this *Sphere of life*. The reason for this is that the families of migrant Christians are often not with them in Saudi Arabia.

- Pressure is most extreme in the *Church, National and Private spheres of life* which is typical for a situation in which *Islamic oppression* is the main persecution engine combined with *Dictatorial paranoia*.
- Pressure resulting from the persecution engine *Islamic oppression* blended with *Ethnic antagonism* is present mostly in the *Private, Family and Community spheres* and is exerted especially on Christians with a Muslim background by the social environment.
- The score for violence rose from 1.7 in WWL 2017 to 4.1 as more reports of violence were registered. A higher number of Christians being arrested, Christian gatherings raided and Christians forced to flee the country for faith related reasons were reported. Christians in the country are usually very careful how they act in order to avoid harsh consequences and this helps keep the violence score down.
- The overall persecution situation in Saudi Arabia is characterized by strong societal and governmental pressure on all inhabitants in a country whose citizens are expected to be Muslims.

Private sphere:

Christians with a Muslim background cannot openly practice their faith. Giving any indication of their new faith to those around them can have serious consequences. Many expatriate Christians from the West have relatively more freedom to practice their faith privately and on their own compounds, as long as they do not evangelize Muslims. Asian and African Christians have to act carefully and persecution depends on the attitude and religion of fellow low-paid workers who live in the same "labor camps". Especially vulnerable are the Christian maids living in Saudi houses who are without any contact with other Christians and face constant abuse and pressure to become Muslim.

Family sphere:

All Saudis are considered Muslims. For a Muslim family, it is a great disgrace when one of its members leaves Islam. Converts run the great risk of honor-killing or physical violence if their families or communities discover their faith. A number have fled the country because of this. Open Christian weddings cannot be celebrated in Saudi Arabia and Christians with a Muslim background must marry according to Islamic rites. They cannot have their children registered as Christians or give them obviously Christian names. In school, children of converts are obliged to attend Islamic classes. In the case of divorces, custody of children and inheritance issues, converts are often disadvantaged.

Community sphere:

All Christians are more or less put under pressure to renounce their faith through all kinds of discrimination. Converts to Christianity will experience harassment and discrimination in their workplace if their new faith is known. Sentiments against adherents of other religions are strong throughout Saudi society. Asian and African workers, including Christians, have been exposed to verbal, physical and sexual

abuse from employers. International schools are banned from using non-Islamic holidays, such as Christmas and New Year, for school vacation. Schools violating this ban risk losing their permits.

National sphere:

There are no provisions for religious freedom in the kingdom's constitution or basic laws. The legal system is based on Sharia law and conversion to any religion other than Islam is punishable by death. Muslims have more rights than followers of other religions. Converts in particular face serious pressure in dealing with the authorities if their Christian faith is known. Foreign Christians will face problems in this sphere of life if they are active in proselytizing Muslims, which can lead to imprisonment and deportation.

Church sphere:

There are no church buildings at all in Saudi Arabia and Christian services take place at secret places. Although the government recognizes the right of non-Muslims to worship in private, the religious police (Muttawa) often do not respect this right. Christian services are seriously restricted by the strict gender segregation, prohibiting men and women from different families to worship in the same room. Christians who engage in such activities risk arrest, intimate body searches in life-threatening conditions, imprisonment, lashing, deportation, and torture. As the law is not formally codified, the legal status of private religious practice remains vague and is based mainly on official announcements in the media. Proselytism of Muslims, Bible training, publishing and importing Bibles (and other Christian materials) in Arabic are all illegal.

Violence:

There were more reports on anti-Christian violence, leading to a higher score for violence and a higher total score than in the WWL 2017 reporting period. Three house-churches were closed, some after being raided by the police. A dozen Christians were arrested, the majority of them while being present at a church meeting. Several others were Christians with a Muslim background who were falsely accused of having links with extremist groups. They were all released during the WWL 2018 reporting period.

A slightly higher number of Christians were forced to leave the country for faith related reasons than in the WWL 2017 reporting period. Most of these were Christians with a Muslim background who had received death threats. A few were also some of the arrested migrant Christians as their residence permits were not extended after their arrest. As in previous years, rape and sexual harassment remain a huge problem in Saudi Arabia. Asian and African Christians, mainly housemaids working in Saudi homes, are very vulnerable in this respect. According to country researchers 'thousands and thousands' of house maids are suffering from physical and sexual abuse. More research needs to be done into this topic.

Many converts are under strong pressure from their families or others and are fearful of their violent reaction if their new faith would become known. Although converts run a high risk of being sentenced to death for apostasy, as far as is known there were no official executions for this reason in recent times. Nevertheless, the risk of extra-judicial killings cannot be excluded in an attempt to save the honor of the family.

Gender profile of persecution

Female:

In a country where all citizens are considered to be Muslim, female Christians with a Muslim background are especially vulnerable. If their conversion gets known, they risk violence, house-arrest and forced marriage. In the strict Islamic Saudi society, women are closely monitored. They need to mind the family's reputation - any undesired behavior can harm their family's honor, which is considered a mortal sin. Leaving Islam is one of the biggest crimes a Muslim can commit. Saudi's legal system is based on Sharia Law and apostasy carries the death sentence. If married, a female convert risks divorce and losing custody of her children. This means loss of a social safety net and protection. Considering this, it comes as no surprise that many female converts ultimately leave the country, for their own safety.

Asian and African workers are known to suffer from physical and sexual abuse by their employers. Christian and other non-Islamic workers are additionally vulnerable in this respect. Among them, women are even more at risk of abuse. This is very much connected to the subordinate position of women in Saudi society and their unprotected status as women alone (working outside their house). For instance, Saudi women are not allowed to leave home without the companion of a male relative.

Male:

Deviations from standard behavior is quickly noticed and male converts to Christianity will experience pressure exerted by family and society.

Future outlook

In its annual forecast, the Economist Intelligence Unit¹¹³, expects crown prince Mohammed bin Salman to 'continue to tighten his grip on power, evidenced recently by the mass arrest of senior royal family members. Saudi Arabia's rivalry with Iran will dominate foreign policy, while jihadi terrorist attacks are likely to reoccur during the forecast period. Fiscal austerity will persist, but, even with oil prices slowly recovering, the government will continue to contract substantial new debt.'

Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has loosened social restrictions affecting the youth. As such, cinemas will be opened for the first time in 35 years and women will be allowed to drive as of June 2018. This apparent shift towards younger, more tolerant leadership and away from traditional roots is possibly an effort to compromise with the large group of Saudi youth who long for more freedom. Also, since King Salman took over, the powers of the religious police were reduced. Moreover, the Crown Prince stated in October 2017 that the kingdom needed to "return" to a "moderate Islam that is open to all religions and

¹¹³ See: <http://country.eiu.com/saudi-arabia>, last accessed 13 December 2017.

to the world”.¹¹⁴ Local migrant Christians are hopeful that this would ultimately lead to more tolerance towards other religions, especially if he takes over as king soon. However, it is also the same Crown Prince who started the war against Yemen which has led to the world’s biggest humanitarian crisis at the current time and has added to the persecution of local Christians.

Forced by the continuous decline of the price of oil, Saudi Arabia is looking towards other means of income generation. They are now also eyeing local and international tourism which could also play a role in the opening up of the country and making it more tolerant. Nevertheless, ultra-conservative Islam is still very alive and active in Saudi Arabia and will not allow any changes in society to be too comprehensive. Reforms could in fact cause polarization in society leading to an increase in the targeting and persecution of minorities (including Christians) by ultra-conservative elements.

On an international level, the struggle for power in the region with Iran – mostly in Yemen and Syria - is expected to dominate Saudi foreign agenda. As a result of this struggle and of the government’s confrontation with Islamic militant cells, the government might be inclined to pay less attention to Christian activities. Overall, the expectation is that the severe religious restrictions, which typically result from the persecution engine *Islamic oppression* blended with *ethnic antagonism* in its fully developed form, will continue to lead to severe pressure for religious minorities (including Christians) in 2018.

Policy considerations

Open Doors recommends:

- The international community should engage with the Saudi government to call for provisions in the Constitution and basic laws to protect religious minorities and decriminalize conversions.
- The country’s legislation and Constitution severely restrict Christian gatherings and the distribution of religious literature, in contrary to the principles of the ICCPR. Therefore, the international community should press the Saudi government to grant religious freedom to its citizens.
- The international community should press Saudi Arabia to fully investigate and punish verbal, physical and sexual abuse by employers of their domestic workers from South East Asia and Africa. Some of these are Christians and face extra vulnerability.
- Companies working with the Saudi government should take all available opportunities to discuss the status of Christians in the kingdom.
- The Saudi government should put in place a mechanism to hold the religious police accountable for violations of freedom of religion. [Return to Contents \(page 1\)](#)

¹¹⁴ See: <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/10/saudi-crown-prince-promises-return-moderate-islam-171024182102549.html>, last accessed 13 December 2017.

13. Maldives

Reporting period: 1 November 2016 - 31 October 2017

Position on World Watch List (WWL)

WWL 2018: Points: 78 / Position: 13

WWL 2017: Points: 76 / Position: 13

WWL 2016: Points: 76 / Position: 13

The increase of two points compared to the WWL 2017 score is due mainly to an increase of pressure on Christians in the *Family* and *Church spheres of life*. While the former affects converts, who have virtually no space at all to live out their Christian faith, the latter affects expatriates (often migrant workers) who lack possibilities for worshipping together without fearing arrest and deportation. Consequently, the Maldives is one of the few countries where the *Church sphere* receives maximum points.

Persecution engines

Persecution engines for the Maldives ¹¹⁵	
Islamic oppression	Very strong
Religious nationalism	Not at all
Ethnic antagonism	Not at all
Denominational protectionism	Not at all
Communist and post-Communist oppression	Not at all
Secular intolerance	Very Weak
Dictatorial paranoia	Strong
Organized corruption and crime	Strong

Islamic oppression (Very strong):

The Islamic government continues to perceive itself as the protector of Islam, instituting a set of laws that basically prohibits a Maldivian from leaving Islam and converting to another religion. To be Maldivian is equated with being a Muslim, leaving no room for any deviation, and a convert will face harsh consequences including losing citizenship. Officially there are no Maldivian Christians, only expatriate Christians. The growing Islamization was illustrated in the WWL 2018 reporting period by a public outcry from concerned parents over pictures of two Christian churches in social studies textbooks for Grades 1-4. The books had recently been introduced by the new management at Gateway International School without official approval from the appropriate Maldivian ministry. A local news website accused the school

¹¹⁵ The scale for the level of influence of Persecution engines and Drivers in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong.

of being “a gateway to turning Maldivians [in]to Christians”. The books had to be [recalled](#)¹¹⁶. The appointment of a radical cleric to the [highest Islamic council](#)¹¹⁷ in December 2016 also fits this observation. This reflects the difficult situation the Christian minority in the Maldives finds itself in. When a company gave staff Swiss army knives as gifts in the WWL 2018 reporting period, reportedly all staff scratched the white emblem off the front of the knives because it appeared to be a cross.

Dictatorial paranoia (Strong):

Political freedoms continue to be embattled. Government opposition members were banned from entering the Parliament building in August 2017. President Yameen tries to win voters by elaborating on religion, and in his [fourth state-of-the-nation address](#)¹¹⁸, he announced a program to "promote Islamic unity and foster religious and national spirit" among the public. Freedom of religion is restricted still further since the “protection of religion” is purely understood to mean the protection of Islam. The protection against destroying “religious unity” is also worrying, as this wording indicates that the authorities will oppose any perceived deviation from their understanding of Islam. All these laws and rhetoric not only show that Islam will be protected at all costs, but also reflects how *Islamic oppression* is blended with *Dictatorial paranoia*, because Islam is being used as a justification for limiting political freedoms. (For further details see: Section 3: Context.)

Organized corruption and crime (Strong):

Corruption runs rampant through the Maldives, from the highest levels of government on down. Almost anything can be accomplished through sufficient bribes, favors and/or threats. Contracts and other agreements can be broken on a whim and government officials hire young street gang members to do dirty work for them (e.g. roughing people up, committing property crimes against designated targets, selling contraband to raise cash). Many street gangs are controlled by government leaders (at all levels), and especially target anyone who speaks out against the government or against strict Islam. Radical Islamic groups that want to ferret out Christians and atheists also have connections and influence with gangs and corrupt or brutal police networks. Some criminals (individual or in a gang) act for their own benefit, but without specific intent to promote anarchy.

Drivers of persecution

Drivers of persecution in the Maldives	
Government officials at any level from local to national	Very Strong
Ethnic group leaders	Not at all
Non-Christian religious leaders at any level from local to national	Very Strong

¹¹⁶ See: <http://maldivesindependent.com/society/maldives-school-recalls-textbooks-after-controversy-over-pictures-of-churches-128314>, 9 January 2017, last accessed 25 August 2017.

¹¹⁷ See: <http://maldivesindependent.com/politics/radical-cleric-appointed-to-top-islamic-council-128016>, 14 December 2016, last accessed 25 August 2017.

¹¹⁸ See: <http://maldivesindependent.com/politics/stability-development-and-prosperity-yameens-state-of-the-nation-address-128621>, 6 February 2017, last accessed 25 August 2017.

Christian religious leaders at any level from local to national	Not at all
Violent religious groups	Strong
Ideological pressure groups	Not at all
Normal citizens (people from the general public), including mobs	Very Strong
Own (extended) family	Very Strong
Political parties at any level from local to national	Strong
Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups	Not at all
Organized crime cartels or networks	Medium
Multilateral organizations (e.g. UN) and embassies	Not at all

The government of the Maldives insists that the country has to be run by conservative Islamic tenets and that all citizens have to be Muslims. Therefore religious freedom does not exist, except for expatriate Christians who are strictly monitored and intimidated in such a way that they even do not dare to meet behind closed doors. Additionally, the government is deeply involved in a political struggle with opposition forces and therefore cracks down on any perceived threat ever quicker and more strongly. Fundamental Islamic preachers and clerics, whether homegrown or coming from the Middle East, are exerting strong socio-religious control of their groups and are influencing others with their radical views of Islam, making it impossible for Christians - especially converts - to show their faith due to the fear of monitoring and of being handed over to the authorities. Family and community are drivers of persecution for converts as well, if they are discovered. As already mentioned, radical Muslims are linking up with gangs and using them to ferret out Christians and atheists or anyone suspected of being one.

Context

The Maldives are a country in turmoil. Internationally, they still have the image of being a holiday paradise; however, the country follows a strict form of Islam and is struggling with unrest and many political challenges. Not even a month after his arrest, in March 2015, former President Mohammed Nasheed was sentenced to thirteen years in prison without getting a fair trial. Those protesting were sacked, as were several high-ranking politicians including the Minister of Defense and the Vice-President. Former President Nasheed was permitted to travel to London in order to receive health treatment in January 2016, where he was granted political asylum in the United Kingdom in May 2016. Shortly afterwards several (mainly exiled) politicians, including himself, launched a platform called “United Maldives Opposition”. This platform may not be 100% unified, but despite being exiled has managed to destabilize the ruling Progressive Party of Maldives (PPM) even further. The PPM has been experiencing serious divisions and President Yameen even faces losing his majority in parliament. He brought about an exit from the Commonwealth¹¹⁹ at the end of his term in October 2016, reflecting the quickly deteriorating human rights situation.

¹¹⁹ The Commonwealth of Nations is a voluntary intergovernmental organization made up of 52 member states (mostly territories of the former British Empire) and operates by intergovernmental consensus. There had been calls in 2016 to place the Maldives under political pressure due to a “severe democracy deficit”, as reported by Maldives Independent on 28 September 2016, see: <http://maldivesindependent.com/politics/commonwealth-envoy-briefed-watchdog-of-severe-democracy-deficit-in-maldives-126808>, last accessed 25 August 2017.

In May 2017, the opposition had a successful win in local elections. In July 2017, ten members of parliament decided to switch allegiance from the ruling party and [side with the opposition](#)¹²⁰, a move which was not accepted by the Constitutional Court, [which banned them instead](#)¹²¹. [Banning parliamentarians](#)¹²² from entering the Parliament building - and thus hindering them from fulfilling the very duties for which they have been elected – as happened in August 2017 - is glaring proof of the fractured state of the Maldives. The government seems to be in a state of *Dictatorial paranoia* acting according to the motto “Who is not for us, is against us” and ignoring all criticism and warnings from [the international community](#)¹²³.

According to government estimates in August 2016, the Maldives are home to more than 130,000 migrant workers, most of them employed in the tourist sector. In relation to the number of inhabitants of the Maldives, an estimated 382,000 people in 2018, this is a surprisingly high number. Even more so as Transparency Maldives, a local NGO, estimates that the real number of migrant workers is closer to 200,000. Given these figures, it is not surprising that human trafficking [the illegal supply of migrant workers] is the second most lucrative economic sector after tourism, according to official government figures from 2011. These figures also imply that the lack of freedom of religion in the country affects not only the very small number of Maldivian Christians but also Christians from among the migrant workers. (The large number of migrant workers causes certain social problems which are discussed below in the Section “Future Outlook”.)

There are no recognized religious minorities of any kind in the Maldives. All nationals are required to be Muslim by law. Anyone giving evidence of support for any religion or philosophy besides Islam (e.g. Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, atheism) will be persecuted in the same way as Christians and most of them prefer to go into exile rather than face jail or even death. Atheists or people seen as atheists have been killed for their convictions (see “Future Outlook”).

Christian communities and how they are affected

Communities of expatriate Christians:

Expatriate Christians often come from India, Sri Lanka or Bangladesh. These communities are monitored closely, but most of them have the freedom to worship provided they stay strictly amongst themselves. Expatriate Christians do not have any contact with indigenous converts from Islam.

¹²⁰ See: <http://maldivesindependent.com/politics/ppm-refuses-to-accept-en-masse-resignation-of-lawmakers-131479>, 13 July 2017, last accessed 25 August 2017.

¹²¹ See: <http://maldivesindependent.com/politics/mps-will-forfeit-seat-for-leaving-party-supreme-court-rules-131486>, 13 July 2017, last accessed 25 August 2017.

¹²² See: <http://maldivesindependent.com/politics/dozen-opposition-mps-face-charges-for-entering-parliament-building-132008>, 14 August 2017, last accessed 25 August 2017.

¹²³ See: <http://maldivesindependent.com/politics/western-powers-call-on-maldives-to-restore-independence-of-parliament-131691>, 26 July 2017, last accessed 25 August 2017.

Historical Christian communities:

There are no historical churches in the Maldives.

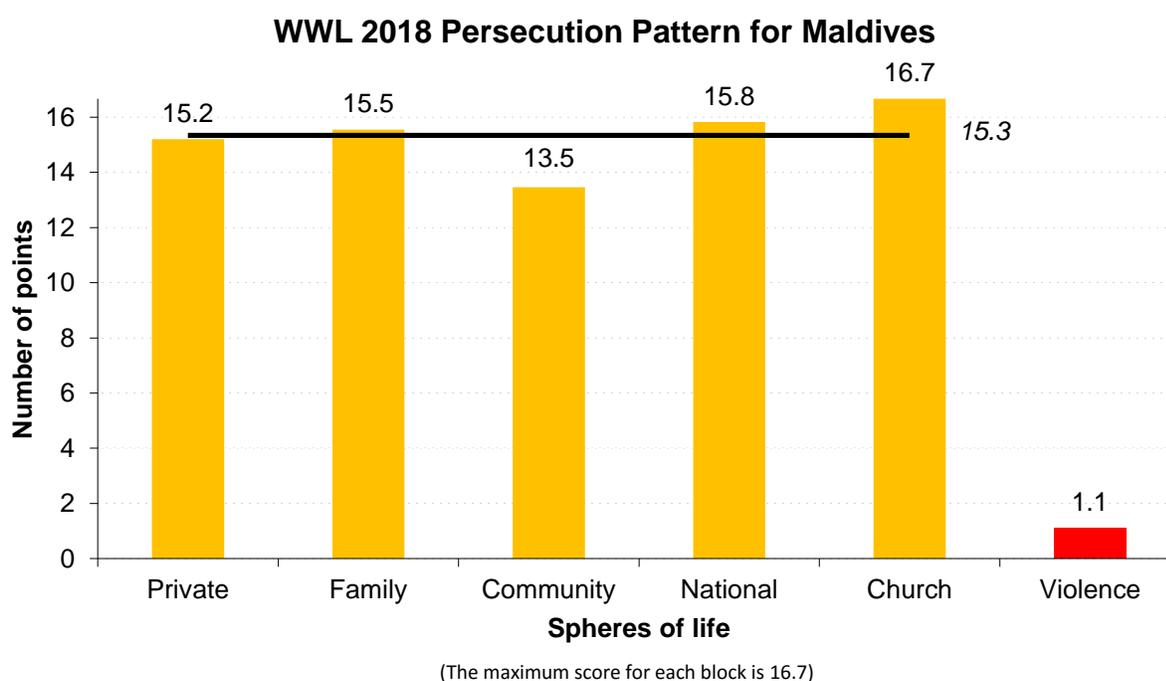
Communities of converts to Christianity:

Christians with a Muslim background face by far the highest persecution as - officially - they do not exist in the country. It is understood that every Maldivian must be Muslim and anyone leaving Islam will lose his or her citizenship.

Non-traditional Christian communities:

These do not exist in the Maldives.

Pressure in the 5 spheres of life and violence



The Persecution pattern shows:

- Pressure on Christians in the Maldives increased in all *Spheres of life* except the *National sphere*, causing the average pressure to be at an extreme level. It rose from a score of 15.1 in WWL 2017 to 15.3 in WWL 2018.
- Pressure is strongest in the *Church sphere*, where it reached the maximum score, reflecting that in practice no meetings are possible and even most expatriate Christians prefer not to organize meetings out of fear of repercussions. Apart from that, scores in the *National, Family and Private spheres* are at an extreme level. Pressure on converts is especially acute in the *Private and Family spheres*. All politicians tirelessly announce that they are keeping the Maldives 100% Muslim, leaving effectively no space for any deviation.

- The score for violence against Christians increased from 0.7 in WWL 2017 to 1.1, but persecution has never been very violent in the Maldives.

Private sphere:

Any Maldivian displaying a lifestyle different from what the government considers Islamic will be punished. Converts to Christianity always have to exercise the utmost care to hide their faith as much as possible. Bibles and other Christian materials have to be hidden carefully and can only be read with much caution as their families will never accept their conversion and possession could result in imprisonment. Even for migrant Christians it is dangerous to keep Christian materials in their possession (especially if these are in the native Dhivehi language or in large quantities) as the authorities may suspect they are being used to evangelize the local population. In fact, when entering the country, all travelers are required to declare any non-Muslim materials they are bringing in with them. The law prohibits expatriate Christians from sharing about their faith to others, and their job contracts even stipulate this condition. Meeting with other Christians is a major challenge in these circumstances since, on the one the hand it is dangerous for the individual, and on the other hand it may disclose or endanger a Christian meeting. One case was reported where two friends were both active Christians but hid their faith from one another out of fear. Private meetings are theoretically allowed, but participants need to be very cautious not to raise suspicions and as intimidation has increased, most Christians prefer not to meet at all.

In November 2016, [religious scholars](#)¹²⁴ said that “those who want religious freedom in Maldives should go and live in other countries that grant it. Hence, those who want to practice other religions are free to leave the country. Only non-Muslims have the right to practice whatever religion they want to. If a Muslim leaves Islam that is blasphemy. If they do not repent, they should be killed.” And in December 2016, the [defense minister](#)¹²⁵ said: “The government of Maldives has taken necessary steps to ensure that Maldives remain as a hundred percent Islamic country and that one important step taken to protect the religion in Maldives is explicitly stating in the constitution that the state religion is Islam. You can be a Maldivian only if you believe in Allah. No laws that are contradictory to Islam can be made in the Maldives. Hence, Islam is protected in Maldives very well.”

Family sphere:

Article 9 (d) of the Constitution states that a non-Muslim may not become a citizen of the Maldives. Accordingly, if Maldivians are found to have converted to Christianity, they could be stripped of their citizenship as well as punished under the laws of *Sharia*. As every Maldivian is automatically understood to be a Muslim, registration for converts is out of the question. Similarly, expatriate Christians are not allowed to hold any religious activities in public (including Christian weddings, funerals, baptisms – which therefore have to be carried out in utmost secrecy). The Constitution states in Article 36 (c): “Education shall strive to inculcate obedience to Islam, love for Islam...”. Children of converts are forced to study Islamic teachings, while children of expatriate Christians are exempt from attending Islamic classes. The Maldivian Democracy Network, a local human rights group, stated in a 2015 report that Islamic textbooks

¹²⁴ See: <http://www.miadhu.mv/article/en/6233>, last accessed 7 December 2017.

¹²⁵ See: <http://www.miadhu.mv/article/en/6669>, last accessed 7 December 2017.

used in schools cultivate anti-Semitism and xenophobia, and glorify *jihad* or war against those who allegedly “obstruct” Islam. Converts often decide not to share their new-won faith with their children out of fear that these may inadvertently tell others. Once converts are discovered, they can be put under pressure to divorce (if married) and lose both custody of their children and inheritance rights, and are likely to be isolated from their families.

Community sphere:

Social control in the Maldives is extremely strong as the population density is one of the highest in the world, especially in the capital Malé. Expatriate Christians are not permitted to openly practice their faith and expatriate Christians with a Muslim background have virtually no place of privacy. On the contrary, colleagues at work apply constant pressure to make them convert to Islam, trying to prove to migrant workers that Jesus is not the Savior and even using money or promises of promotion at times. Converts try to blend in with the majority of people around them in their efforts to hide their faith. This includes clothing as well as attendance at the local mosque. Any native believer who is caught not attending will be questioned. Expatriate Christians enjoy more freedom, but there are times when they too are required to blend in, for example during Ramadan, by not drinking and eating in public.

National sphere:

The Constitution and other laws and policies restrict religious freedom. The Constitution designates Sunni Islam as the official state religion, referring to the country as “100 percent” Muslim, and government regulations are based on Islamic law. The Maldives take no little pride in this. Among other regulations, one states: “It is illegal to propagate any other religion than Islam.” Penalties for violating this regulation range from house-arrest to imprisonment of up to five years, depending on the gravity of the offense. If the offenders are foreigners, they will usually be deported. Any opinions that seem contrary to Islam (even voices of Islamic moderation) are subject to harsh criticism and even violence. Especially with a “Defamation Law” in place, which includes clauses against anti-Islamic comments, Christians’ freedom of speech is restricted even more than before. Violations can result in six months in prison.

In 2017, the Maldives Broadcasting Commission (MBC) issued a report into a complaint filed over a comment President Yameen made on 1 May 2016, in which the president stated: “We are not Allah’s second sons. We are humans, like in any other country.” The complaint alleged Yameen’s words were un-Islamic, since in Islam, it is blasphemous to claim God had children. Interestingly, the MBC said the Islamic ministry had explained that the remark was a [rebuttal to Jews and Christians](#),¹²⁶ who believe God had fathered children and “who work to hinder the progress and development of the Maldives”. Therefore, it did not violate broadcasting standards, the commission said.

Church sphere:

It is illegal for Maldivians to become Christians, let alone to gather as a church. The expatriate community enjoys more religious freedom as long as they practice their faith privately. There have been incidents

¹²⁶ See: <http://maldivesindependent.com/politics/yameens-remarks-on-sex-workers-opium-spark-controversy-124490>, last accessed 28 November 2017.

where public gatherings of Christians were raided. Expatriate fellowships are under surveillance out of fear that they could be evangelizing local Maldivians. The government banned Christmas celebrations¹²⁷ in guesthouses on inhabited islands in December 2015, claiming that the practice is contrary to Islam and Maldivian culture. The Local Government Authority (LGA) – chaired by Home Minister Umar Naseer – sent a letter to the presidents of island and atoll councils (as well as to the mayors of Malé and Addu cities) asking them to inform guesthouse owners not to conduct any celebratory activities for tourists at Christmas. The letter noted that the current period is the peak season for the tourist industry and that it had come to the LGA’s attention that “tourists are carrying out activities to celebrate Christmas in the Maldives.” Non-Islamic material is considered contraband and by law has to be declared at customs upon entering the country. Accordingly, Christian material cannot be imported or even produced in the country. Training Christian leaders is out of the question and Christian communities are not allowed to receive foreign Christian workers for ministry work.

Violence:

Due to security considerations, no details can be given. However, incidents of confiscating a Bible upon arrival as well as the detention and deportation of Christians took place in the WWL 2018 reporting period.

Gender profile of persecution

Female/Male:

No data available

Future outlook

The Maldives is becoming a land in turmoil. Civil liberties are increasingly restricted, including media and social media, as the shocking [killing](#)¹²⁸ of well-known blogger Yameen Rasheed in April 2017 in the capital Malé showed. Given that the government’s goal of protecting Islam remains unchanged and is even persistently re-emphasized, it is plain that the situation for religious minorities, especially Christians, is becoming increasingly difficult.

¹²⁷ See: <http://maldivesindependent.com/business/maldives-bans-christmas-celebrations-at-guesthouses-120958>, last accessed 20 December 2016.

¹²⁸ See: https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/23/world/asia/yameen-rasheed-dead-maldives-blogger-dead.html?ref=todayspaper&utm_source=Pew+Research+Center&utm_campaign=52f02e25af-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2017_04_24&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_3e953b9b70-52f02e25af-399904105&r=0, 23 April 2017, last accessed 25 August 2017.

The island's younger generation feels increasingly "disenfranchised and excluded" and "disconnected from the fabric of society", as indicated by a [World Bank report](#)¹²⁹ released in October 2014. Rising globalization, internet use and economic expansion have "exposed young women and men to the outside world and new ideas and values, making them acutely aware of what they can aspire to", reads the report. "Yet, both female and male youth face the shackles of the limited island economy, lack empowerment and community engagement, and contend with rigid norms of behaviour and increasingly conservative values, as well as an inadequate education and training system that ill prepares them for the labor market." The report argues that these issues mean that many young Maldivians are being "denied passage into adulthood". These social issues translate into a growing radicalization, as seen in the numbers of Maldivians who join the fighting in Iraq and Syria. One observer even referred to the Maldives as "[a Paradise lost to terrorism](#)"¹³⁰. This may be an exaggeration but the Maldives do have one of the highest per capita rates of terrorists fighting abroad. The government is well aware of these threats, but prefers to [heavily fine](#)¹³¹ broadcasters who dare to publicize any such internal state details, as happened in June 2017. Additionally, the government is emphasizing its defense of being 100% Muslim as shown in a speech by the [defense minister](#)¹³² and by the president, who said that the Maldives is target for "[ideological warfare](#)"¹³³ against Islam in November 2017.

There is one other big question the Maldives are facing, namely its relationship to Saudi Arabia. This is connected to the country's growing Islamization since funding for major projects often come from the Saudi kingdom. In preparation for a visit by the Saudi king to the Maldives in March 2017, reports said that the government had plans to sell the Faafu atoll for a sum of US\$10 billion dollar so that Saudi Arabia could develop it into the equivalent of the French Riviera. However, the leaked information seems to have displeased the Saudi king, causing him to [postpone his trip](#)¹³⁴. It remains to be seen if the relations to its big sponsors are in any way inhibited now. All this, together with the political fracas reported above in the section "Context", shows that the persecution engines *Islamic oppression* and *Dictatorial paranoia* are intertwined and very influential.

¹²⁹ See:

<http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/460551468263693729/pdf/939490WPOP15300th0Report0with0cover.pdf>, last accessed 20 December 2016.

¹³⁰ See: <https://jamestown.org/program/the-maldives-losing-a-tourist-paradise-to-terrorism/>, last accessed 1 December 2016.

¹³¹ See: <http://maldivesindependent.com/politics/cable-tv-provider-fined-half-a-million-for-airing-al-jazeera-corruption-expose-131202>, 17 June 2017, last accessed 25 August 2017.

¹³² See: <http://maldivesindependent.com/politics/on-anniversary-of-1988-coup-maldives-threatened-by-secularism-and-extremism-133956>, last accessed 28 November 2017.

¹³³ See: <http://maldivesindependent.com/politics/president-warns-of-ideological-warfare-malicious-economic-schemes-134144>, last accessed 28 November 2017.

¹³⁴ See: <http://www.dhivehisitee.com/executive/faafu-saudi-maldives-sale-4/>, 17 March 2017, last accessed 25 August 2017.

Policy considerations

- The government of Maldives should uphold the citizens' right to change one's religion.
- Article 9 (d) of the Constitution which states that a non-Muslim may not become a citizen of the Maldives would mean converts would lose their citizenship, thus, the government should amend this provision.
- Countries that do business, especially pertaining to tourism, with the government of Maldives should discuss the issue of religious freedom with the country's leaders, and integrate the Freedom of Religion or Belief standards in their business policy.
- The international community, with the guidance of the UN Special Rapporteur Mr. Ahmed Shaheed, should raise awareness of the situation of religious minorities in the Maldives and attacks against the Special Rapporteur should be strictly condemned by all political players in the country.
- The UN, through the Special Rapporteur Mr. Ahmed Shaheed, should call for the Maldives to repeal the Defamation law ratified in August 2016 in line with international Freedom of Religion or Belief.
- The international community should cooperate with the Maldives to develop a de-radicalization plan for Islamic fighters returning from the Middle East.
- Open Doors welcomes the Maldives' pioneering role in the UN Security Council Resolution 2250 on Youth, Peace and Security, crucial for the prevention and stemming of extremism. The UN in Maldives and UN Security Council should address Freedom of Religion or Belief under the Resolution as a fundamental right for youth and cornerstone for peace and security.
- The UN in Maldives should report on and press the government to comply with Freedom of Religion or Belief as a signatory to and active supporter of the Sustainable Development Goals: Ensuring (10.2) social, economic and political inclusion for Christian minorities and (16.10) guarantees of the fundamental freedoms under international law.

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14. Nigeria

Reporting period: 1 November 2016 - 31 October 2017

Position on World Watch List (WWL)

WWL 2018: Points: 77 / Position: 14

WWL 2017: Points: 78/ Position: 12

WWL 2016: Points: 78/ Position: 12

Nigeria's score of 77 (Rank 14) is one point less in comparison to the WWL 2017 score. Pressure decreased in the *Community* and *National spheres of life*, but still remains at a very high levels in all spheres, with Christians living in predominantly Muslim communities in the north facing particular persecution in their daily life. The score for violence rose to 16.5, close to the maximum possible. Despite the relative decline in violence against Christians by Boko Haram, there have been persistent attacks by Fulani Muslim herdsmen in the Middle Belt region.

Persecution engines

Persecution engines ¹³⁵ in Nigeria	
Islamic oppression	Very strong
Religious nationalism	Not at all
Ethnic antagonism	Medium
Denominational protectionism	Weak
Communist and post-Communist oppression	Not at all
Secular intolerance	Not at all
Dictatorial paranoia	Not at all
Organized corruption and crime	Medium

Islamic oppression (Very strong):

Although the Islamic militant group Boko Haram is most often associated with the persecution of Christians in northern Nigeria, the pattern of persecution is much more complex than simply the killing or wounding of Christians (and moderate Muslims) by radical Islamic militants. This is especially so in the twelve northern Sharia states where local government and communities leave little freedom for Christians to live out their faith. In line with the violent traditions of the Maitatsine riots of the 1980s and the Sharia implementation of 2001, Christians in northern Nigeria have increasingly become targets for jihadist attacks. Building on this, Boko Haram has, for the past few years, carried out a systematic campaign against the Nigerian state, specifically targeting Christians in its ideology, rhetoric and actions with the intent of

¹³⁵ The scale for the level of influence of Persecution engines and Drivers in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong.

establishing an Islamic state. Using the rhetoric of radical Islam, it declared an Islamic caliphate in Gwoza, Borno State, in August 2014. The expansion of this caliphate has now been stopped by government forces, but the violence caused by Boko Haram continues to affect thousands of people (especially Christians), and fosters a mutual distrust between Christians and Muslims in the entire region, if not country.

Violence is also perpetrated by Islamic assailants, commonly identified as Muslim herdsmen, who descend on villages in the Middle Belt region (often at night) attacking innocent people, including women and children. There have also been reports that the state governments of Benue, Kaduna, Nasarawa and Taraba States are pushing to establish and reserve grazing fields for Fulani Muslim herdsmen.¹³⁶ This means that swaths of land are taken away from indigenous Christian communities for that purpose, depriving Christians of their farming fields and livelihood.

Ethnic antagonism (Medium):

There are indications that *Ethnic antagonism* has led to violence against the Church in parts of Nigeria. For instance, although not in the WWL 2018 reporting period, there have been reports of violent attacks by animists against churches and [priests](#).¹³⁷ Furthermore, there are also studies confirming antagonism and conflict between adherents of African traditional religions and Christianity in the south eastern part of [Nigeria](#).¹³⁸ Since such traditional religions are very often ethnic specific and considered to be the repositories of the culture of ethnic groups, the antagonism against Christianity can be considered as being prompted partially by *Ethnic antagonism*. Furthermore, due to the fact that ethnic fault-lines in the country also reflect religious divisions, *Ethnic antagonism* feeds into the overall persecution of and violence against Christians. The movement for secession in south eastern Nigeria seems to be aggravating the situation and in June 2017 a group called the Arewa Youth Consultative Forum issued an ultimatum to ethnic Igbos living in the north (most of whom are Christians) to leave northern Nigeria and go back to their home states within three [months](#).¹³⁹ The group has also declared its intention to confiscate all properties owned by Igbos in northern Nigeria.

Organized Corruption and Crime (Medium):

There is a threat to Church that is caused and driven by organized crime networks which engage in extortion and at times in kidnapping. The pervasive nature of corruption in the country has also

¹³⁶ For a better understanding of the background to the violence in these states see the recent series of detailed reports prepared by World Watch Research and partners:
[Nigeria – Investigating common narratives of violent conflict in Nasarawa State – 2016](#)
[Nigeria Renew – Crushed-but-not-defeated-Full-Report – 2016](#)
[Nigeria – Violent Conflict in Taraba State \(2013 – 2015\) – 2015](#)
[Nigeria – Ethnic cleansing in the Middle Belt Region – 2015](#)
[Nigeria – Migration and Violent Conflict in Divided Societies – 2015](#)
[Nigeria – Boko Haram and Gender-Based Violence against Christian Women and Children in North-Eastern Nigeria since 1999 – reissued 2015.](#)

All available at: <http://theanalytical.org/reports/>, password: freedom.

¹³⁷ See <https://www.worthynews.com/931-nigeria-animists-attack-churches-and-priests-for-making-gods-angry>, last accessed 27 September 2017.

¹³⁸ See <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/2158244017709322>, last accessed 27 September 2017.

¹³⁹ See <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/more-news/233266-arewa-groups-ask-igbos-to-leave-northern-nigeria-threaten-violence.html>, last accessed 27 September 2017.

contributed to the weak and ineffectual nature of the response by Nigerian security forces to the threats faced by Christians who are attacked by Boko Haram and the Fulani herdsmen. There are also pockets of organized crime that are directly affecting the church. Christians are also specifically targeted for killings in the South by such groups.

Drivers of persecution

Drivers of persecution in Nigeria	
Government officials at any level from local to national	Strong
Ethnic group leaders	Medium
Non-Christian religious leaders at any level from local to national	Very Strong
Christian religious leaders at any level from local to national	Not at all
Violent religious groups	Very Strong
Ideological pressure groups	Not at all
Normal citizens (people from the general public), including mobs	Medium
Own (extended) family	Very Strong
Political parties at any level from local to national	Medium
Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups	Not at all
Organized crime cartels or networks	Medium
Multilateral organizations (e.g. UN) and embassies	Weak

Drivers of Persecution for *Islamic oppression*:

In the Nigerian context, armed Islamist groups like Boko Haram as well as the militants that are often referred to as Fulani Muslim herdsmen are the major drivers of persecution. These groups are responsible for the most violent incidents of persecution as illustrated in the killing and displacement of Christians in northern Nigeria and in the Middle Belt region. In addition to these groups government officials and politicians - particularly at the state level - are also drivers of persecution in the northern part of the country where Sharia law has been put in place as state law. Ordinary people - particularly the immediate and extended family of converts - are also drivers of persecution when it comes to Muslim background believers.

Drivers of persecution for *Ethnic antagonism*:

In many parts of Nigeria - especially in the north - ethnic fault-lines coincide with religious divisions. The main drivers of the resulting *Ethnic antagonism* include ordinary citizens and religious leaders (who also act as traditional leaders of ethnic groups). Armed groups such as the Fulani Muslim herdsmen are also important actors. Nigeria's politics is very much influenced by ethnicity and as a result politicians and political parties also indirectly contribute to the impunity enjoyed by the perpetrators of violent persecution. (President Buhari is, for example, ethnic Fulani.)

Drivers of Persecution for *Organized corruption and crime*:

Corrupt government officials and organized criminal groups engage in drug trafficking and criminal groups in some parts of southern Nigeria also try to use churches as convenient instruments for money-laundering. As a result, churches and Christians get entangled in the conflict and violence of such groups.

Context

On 29 May 2015 Muhammadu Buhari was sworn in as the fourth president of Nigeria since the adoption of the current Nigerian Constitution. In his inauguration speech¹⁴⁰ he promised to bring “increased prosperity” to the country, and also vowed to tackle corruption and the insurgency headed by Boko Haram which he described as “a mindless, godless group, who are as far away from Islam as one can think”. In fact, the Nigerian army has been relatively successful in driving Boko Haram away from the territories it had occupied. However, despite this success in fighting Boko Haram, which has been responsible for much of the violence against Christians in recent years, the continuing violence against Christians in the Middle Belt region of Nigeria remains an enormous source of concern. As reported by World Watch Research in 2015 in the report “[Ethnic cleansing in the Middle Belt Region of Nigeria](#)”¹⁴¹, a vicious circle of violence in the Middle Belt region of Nigeria is taking place in the shadow of Boko Haram. Attacks perpetrated by Fulani herdsmen and settlers have led to the deaths of thousands of Christians, with hundreds of churches and properties targeted and destroyed.¹⁴²

The persecution of Christians through *Islamic oppression* does not extend to the whole of Nigeria, however. Looking from the point of view of hostilities against Christians, the Nigerian landscape can be divided into distinct regions:

- The North (19 states & the Abuja Federal Capital Territory) is mainly Muslim, with Christian majority states in the Middle Belt. Large parts of the Middle Belt have become part of the twelve so-called Sharia-states in the North. For example, Kaduna-North is Muslim majority, Kaduna-South is Christian majority, but the Kaduna administration is Muslim dominated.
- The South (17 states) is mainly Christian, but the South-West (Yoruba) has a large Muslim population.

Nigeria is one of the most complex nations on the African continent. The persecution of Christians overlaps with clashes over the control of resources in some states. According to human rights activists and reports, the Nigerian government barely investigates the killings and abuses of Christians at the hands of radical Islamic organizations and/or individuals. By doing so, the government has failed to fulfil its international

¹⁴⁰ See: <https://guardian.ng/features/president-muhammadu-buharis-inaugural-speech/>, last accessed 8 September 2017.

¹⁴¹ See: <http://theanalytical.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Ethnic-cleansing-in-the-Middle-Belt-Region-of-Nigeria-2015.pdf> (password: freedom).

¹⁴² See also “Nigeria: Benue State under the shadow of “herdsmen Terrorism” (2014 – 2016) (with update: 1 January – 31 August 2017), available at <http://theanalytical.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Nigeria-Benue-State-2017-WWR.pdf>.

obligation as enshrined under UNDHR and ICCPR. In addition, it has been widely reported that Boko Haram has been doing all it can to incite conflict between Muslim and Christian communities.

Apart from Christians, Nigerian Shia Muslims also face persecution in northern Nigeria including violent attacks from Sunni groups. Jehovah Witnesses are also a religious minority in Nigeria facing discrimination and violence particularly in the north.

Christian communities and how they are affected

Communities of expatriate Christians:

This category does not exist in Nigeria as defined by WWL Methodology.

Historical Christian communities:

In Nigeria these include the Roman Catholic Church and Protestant denominations such as Anglicans, Methodists and Lutherans. In the context of the Boko Haram conflict, it was expected that the number of Christians would decrease. While it is true that Christians have been the majority of the victims killed, displaced or forced to migrate, there are indications that the Christian population may be growing despite of that. Field research has shown that, in the midst of the conflict, Roman Catholics are creating more dioceses and Protestant Christianity is growing faster than might have been expected.

Communities of converts to Christianity:

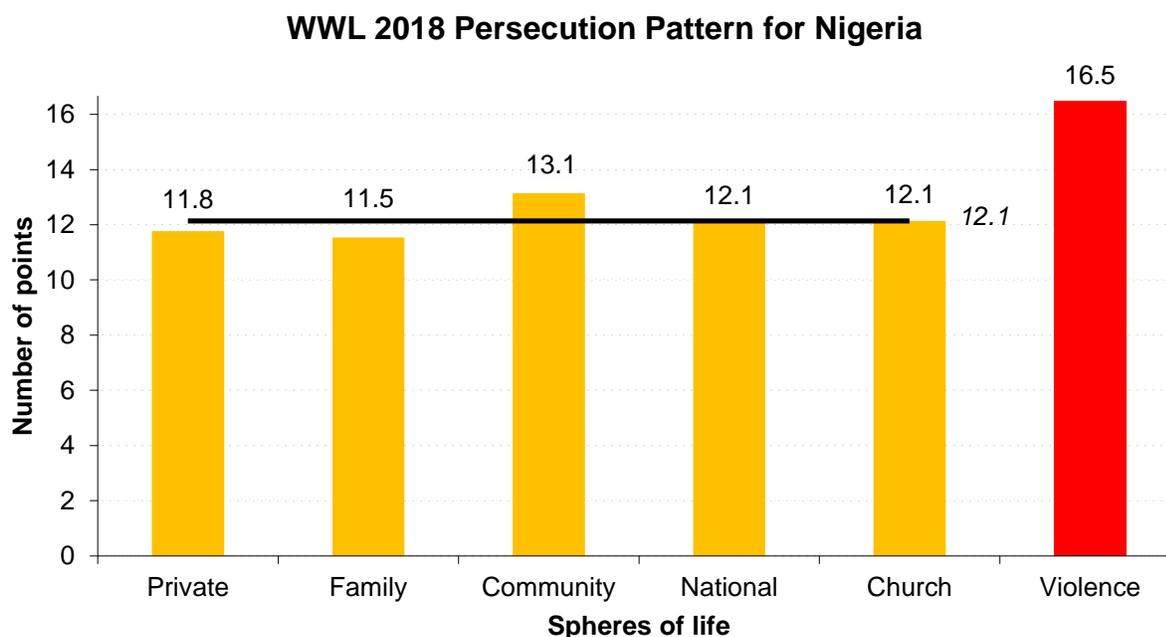
There are communities of converts from Islam to Christianity in Nigeria. In the northern Sharia states especially, conversion from Islam to Christianity is a dangerous act that can lead to many hardships including death threats, beatings and even arrests. For example, Aliyu, 24, who is a believer who converted to Christianity in Plateau State had to flee his village due to the death threats he received from relatives and neighbors because of his [faith](#) (as reported in January 2016).¹⁴³

Non-traditional Christian communities:

The number of Evangelical and Pentecostal communities is increasing in Nigeria. They now constitute about 20% of the Nigerian Church, and this figure is rising. In many of the northern states they are confronted with hardships like all other types of Christianity including violent attacks against their life and property by militant groups and discrimination by local authorities.

¹⁴³ See: <http://www.nairaland.com/2859354/persecution-ex-muslims-nigeria-wiki>, last accessed 27 September 2017.

Pressure in the 5 spheres of life and violence



(The maximum score for each block is 16.7)

The Persecution pattern shows:

- The average pressure on Christians in Nigeria remains at a very high level, but went down from 12.3 in WWL 2017 to 12.1.
- Pressure is strongest in the *Community* and *National spheres of life*. The influence of intolerant and radical versions of Islam in many of the Sharia states in northern Nigeria. Christians living in predominantly Muslim communities in the north (especially in rural areas) are more vulnerable to pressure and persecution in their daily life.
- The score for violence rose from 16.1 in WWL 2017 to 16.5. Despite the relative decline in the violence against Christians by Boko Haram, there have been persistent attacks by Fulani Muslim herdsmen which have caused the score to reach almost maximum level.

Private sphere:

Particularly in Bauchi, Gombo, Yobe and Borno States, more and more Christians find themselves under pressure not to display outwardly Christian symbols or the Bible. In fact, around Ganye, Jada and most parts of Borno and Yobe States, an increasing number of Christians (not just converts) dress like Muslims to hide any Christian articles or materials on them and to escape being lynched.

Family sphere:

Faith-related pressure is most pronounced in the Sharia states, but also partly extends into neighboring states, and plays heavily upon Christians in their family and community spheres of life. Christians cannot

bury their deceased in public cemeteries. Christian girls are under a serious threat of abduction and [forced marriage](#).¹⁴⁴

Community sphere:

In the community sphere, persecution is a problem mainly in northern Nigeria, especially in the Sharia states. In this part of the country, in state schools (especially at the primary and secondary level) Christian children are forced to participate in Islamic studies. Christian youth are often hindered from accessing secondary schools or higher education institutions in northern Nigeria, especially when those institutions are well-funded and have good equipment and high quality teaching. Christian students in northern Nigeria are often considered and treated as second-class citizens. Christian communities in northern Nigeria are also discriminated against in the provision of humanitarian aid despite being displaced by the violence of [Boko Haram](#).¹⁴⁵

National sphere:

In the national sphere as well, the problem is mainly in the northern states. Qualified Christians are often denied employment, and some are asked to give up their Christian faith in order to obtain immediate employment. In the northern Sharia states, Christians live in fear because of the unpredictable environment in which local government officials put pressure on them, sometimes assisted by Hisba (Sharia Police) and Dawah (Islamic missionary) committees. Even though the pressure against Christians is less in the non-Sharia northern states (in comparison to the Sharia states), Christians still face discrimination in national life and find it difficult to get jobs in the public sector.

Church sphere:

It is very difficult for churches to openly integrate new converts from Islam in the north. This would attract the attention of the Islamic community, which could result in violent actions against the churches in their entire area. Pastors are increasingly becoming targets for attacks by radical Muslims to stop any further growth of the Church.

Violence:

Violence against Christians in Nigeria has been extremely high in the WWL 2018 reporting period as has been the case in the past reporting periods as well. An alarming trend in this regard is the southward trajectory of the violence which is disrupting and even uprooting Christian communities around the areas that is often referred to as the Middle Belt. The main perpetrators of violent attacks against Christians have been armed men that are commonly referred to as Fulani Muslim herdsmen. These attacks have resulted in the death, dispossession and eviction of thousands of Christians.

Further examples:

¹⁴⁴ See: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2016/11/child-marriage-becoming-a-cloud-of-crisis-n-nigerian-christian-leaders-warn-president/>, last accessed 27 September 2017.

¹⁴⁵ See: <http://www.christianpost.com/news/christians-victimized-by-boko-haram-denied-food-aid-in-nigerian-displacement-camps-178466/>, last accessed 27 September 2017.

- A raid conducted on five villages that are predominantly inhabited by Christians has resulted in the death of 45 people the Kuru Local Government Area, in the Middle Belt state of [Kaduna](#)¹⁴⁶. The attack occurred on 13 November 2016 and is believed to have been carried out by Fulani Muslim herdsmen. Those who perpetrated the attack also burned down more than one hundred houses including eight house churches.
- In an attack staged by suspected to be Fulani Muslim herdsmen, 20 Christians were killed in the village of [Ancha Bassa](#)¹⁴⁷ in Plateau State on 7 September 2017.
- On 20 July 2017, a church in the city of Onitsha in southern Nigeria was [attacked](#)¹⁴⁸ by gunmen killing 12 and injuring 18. The attack is believed to have been connected to gang warfare involving a wealthy benefactor in the church.

Gender profile of persecution

Female:

Women and girls have often been abducted and subjected to sexual assault and rape. This has been the common practice of both Boko Haram¹⁴⁹ and Fulani Muslim herdsmen. Many of them are also forced into marriage with non-Christians. The fact that there are laws which permit under-age marriage in some states (as well the existence of cultural and religious norms that discourage girls from going to school) contribute to this problem. The persecution of women and girls has a detrimental effect on the Church and Christian families. In addition to the great emotional toll and social cost of such persecution, in some communities where widows are the main bread winners of the family, such persecution of women also affects the economic wellbeing of the community.

Male:

Christian men and boys have often been targeted specifically, especially in the north-eastern part of the country where Boko Haram has been active. Many have been attacked, abducted and forced to join the militant group. Such attacks have a devastating effect on the Church and Christian families.

Future outlook

As the Nigerian army's campaigns seem to be succeeding against Boko Haram, the latter is making more frequent inroads into neighboring countries such as Niger, Chad and Cameroon. If the Nigerian state and other countries in the region congratulate themselves and declare victory too early, Boko Haram will get an opportunity to regroup and continue its attacks against Christians in Nigeria and other countries in the region. Therefore, the situation of Christians in northern Nigeria is partly contingent upon whether or not

¹⁴⁶ See: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2016/11/45-killed-in-yet-another-attack-on-christian-communities-in-kaduna/>

¹⁴⁷ See: <https://www.globalchristiannews.org/article/christian-leaders-decry-killings-by-fulani-herdsmen/>

¹⁴⁸ See: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/08/world/africa/nigeria-ozubulu-church-attack.html>

¹⁴⁹ To understand the background and context of violence against women as a form of persecution in northern Nigeria, see: "Our Bodies, Their Battleground - Boko Haram and Gender-Based Violence against Christian Women and Children in North-Eastern Nigeria since 1999", <http://theanalytical.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Boko-Haram-and-Gender-Based-Violence-against-Christian-Women-and-Children-in-North-Eastern-Nigeria-since-1999-2015.pdf>.

the government of Nigeria and other countries in the region will continue the fight against Boko Haram without relenting.

Northern Nigeria has huge numbers of IDPs, many of whom are Christians. These refugees have been internally displaced either by Boko Haram or by the ferocious attacks (often covered up by local state authorities) of the Fulani herdsmen most of whom happen to be Muslim. Many of them are not taken care of by national or international aid agencies. They are a visible witness to the supremacy of the persecutors and to the high vulnerability of the persecuted in this region. And this in turn encourages further violence with impunity and culminates in constant fear among the persecuted Christians. This vicious circle can only be broken when the international community intervenes by means of humanitarian aid and otherwise.

Islamic oppression and *ethnic antagonism* are likely to persist in Nigeria in the foreseeable future. The blend of these persecution engines is likely to keep northern Nigeria a dangerous place for Christians. The government has so far appeared reluctant to take decisive measures against the violence perpetrated by Fulani herdsmen and settlers fighting for the control of the Middle Belt region of Nigeria. As the next presidential election to be held in 2019 looms closer, this is likely to have significant ramifications on the ground in Nigeria. There is a risk that ethnicity and religion will be used as instruments for mobilizing support on the campaign trail. At the same time, the elections could make the ruling party and president more responsive to the demands and concerns of Christians. However, the risk of a heightened mobilization of constituencies on the basis of ethnicity and religion could also become a reality even before the 2019 election if the ailing President Buhari dies in office.

Policy considerations

Taking in to account the above persecution dynamics, Open Doors suggests the following policy recommendations:

- The Federal and individual state governments should instigate safeguards to ensure that religion will not be used or allowed to be used to promote injustice, impunity and discrimination. The international community should monitor the application of this principle.
- The Federal and individual state governments should ensure equal treatment, development, and economic empowerment of all entities within the states of Nigeria, both those local to the state and those displaced from elsewhere.
- The Federal and individual state governments should ensure needs-based assistance, rehabilitation and reconstruction is provided to victims of Boko Haram and Fulani herdsman attacks and other forms of targeted violence, regardless of location.
- The Federal Government and individual states should put in place measures and programs to protect women's rights, tackle GBV, abduction of girls, forced marriages and also for the rehabilitation and support of girls and women who had experienced such abuse and attacks.

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15. Syria

Reporting period: 1 November 2016 - 31 October 2017

Position on World Watch List (WWL)

WWL 2018 Points: 76 / Position: 15

WWL 2017 Points: 86 / Position: 6

WWL 2016 Points: 87 / Position: 5

With a score of 76 points, Syria ranks 15 on WWL 2018. On WWL 2017, Syria ranked 6 with a score of 86 points. The main reason for this major decline in points is the lower score for violent incidents. The scores for pressure in the different *Spheres of life* remained at an extreme level. Fewer violent incidents were reported as the areas held by IS (Islamic State) shrunk further. Another factor was the difficulty of receiving confirmed information from a country in the chaos of civil war. Of course, this does not mean that anti-Christian violence has disappeared: Christians continued to be abducted, physically and sexually abused, or forced to flee their homes and country etc.

Persecution engines

Persecution engine in Syria ¹⁵⁰	
Islamic oppression	Very strong
Religious nationalism	Not at all
Ethnic antagonism	Strong
Denominational protectionism	Weak
Communist and post-Communist oppression	Not at all
Secular intolerance	Not at all
Dictatorial paranoia	Strong
Organized corruption and crime	Strong

Islamic oppression (Very strong):

The militants of the Islamic State group (IS) - and to a lesser extent those of Jabhat al-Nusra and other radical groups - are currently the main drivers of persecution in Syria. Christians used to have a relatively large amount of religious freedom in pre-civil war Syria. This has changed with the advent of militant Islamic groups. IS set up its caliphate covering large parts of Syria and Iraq at the end of June 2014 and a strict version of Sharia law was implemented. Already in February 2014 Christians in the city of Raqqa were forced to sign a “dhimmi contract” violating their (religious) freedom. Society has radicalized fast, especially in areas controlled by radical Islamic groups. Most Christians fled IS controlled areas, but since

¹⁵⁰ The scale for the level of influence of Persecution engines and Drivers in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong.

the beginning of 2016, IS has been losing more and more of its territory and even lost control over its self-proclaimed capital Raqqa in October 2017. However, the threat of revenge actions by IS is still there. *Islamic oppression* is also present in government-controlled areas, e.g. driven by Islamic leaders, but to a much weaker extent.

Ethnic antagonism (Strong):

Tribalism is characterized by loyalty to one's own tribe or family. This phenomenon tries to enforce the continuing influence of age-old norms and values on a particular social group. As in many countries of the Middle East, tribalism in Syria is very much mixed with Islam and especially affects Christians with a Muslim background. The strength and existence of this engine varies per region and size of cities, tribalism especially being strong in the Kurdish areas in the north and in the desert areas in the center.

Dictatorial paranoia (Strong):

In pre-civil war Syria, *Dictatorial paranoia* was mostly evident in the behavior of government officials. The state monitored churches, for instance, checking sermons for political content. Also, the authorities would discourage conversion from Islam to Christianity or to any other religion, as conversions were seen as possibly harming stability and causing community conflict. Though the latter is still relevant, government officials hardly monitor Christians anymore today as they are preoccupied with their fight against the various opposition groups. Due to the circumstances of war, there is also hardly any attempt to ensure religious freedom for Christians. In present-day Syria, this persecution engine is predominantly driven not by the government, but by armed groups that control parts of Syria and are willing to use any means to stay in power.

Organized corruption and crime (Strong):

In Syria, *Organized corruption and crime* takes place in the civil war situation of impunity and anarchy. Corruption is widespread and also affects access to food and health care. It is a means for self-enrichment; an example is kidnap for ransom. Syrians of different religious backgrounds are being kidnapped. Behind the kidnapping of Christians there are financial, political and ideological motives. Christians have a reputation for being wealthy and supporting the regime. Being part of a vulnerable non-Muslim minority also plays a role in their abductions.

Drivers of persecution

Drivers of persecution in Syria	
Government officials at any level from local to national	Medium
Ethnic group leaders	Medium
Non-Christian religious leaders at any level from local to national	Strong
Christian religious leaders at any level from local to national	Weak
Violent religious groups	Very Strong
Ideological pressure groups	Not at all
Normal citizens (people from the general public), including mobs	Medium

Own (extended) family	Strong
Political parties at any level from local to national	Weak
Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups	Strong
Organized crime cartels or networks	Medium
Multilateral organizations (e.g. UN) and embassies	Very Weak

For all types of Christianity, Islamic militant groups – either IS, al-Nusra or other radical Islamic militant groups - are a clear threat. The extended family is the main source of persecution for converts from Islam. Government authorities are known to restrict the activities of evangelical Christians and converts to prevent societal instability. This move (which can include interrogation and monitoring) is sometimes instigated by the converts' family or even Historical churches. Hate-speech against Christians by Islamic leaders occurs but is not allowed in government-controlled areas and has led to the withdrawal of licenses to preach. Muslim religious leaders are also known to have put pressure on converts directly or indirectly through their families or security agencies. Other sources of pressure on converts from Islam can be ethnic group leaders and normal people from broader society. Finally, criminal gangs have been active in kidnapping Christians for financial gain, though this has become sporadic.

Context

The Syrian civil war began as a popular uprising in 2011, with demands for increased political liberties and economic reforms, similar to the Arab Spring uprisings in other countries at that same period. However the roots of the conflict are deeper and more complicated, and include class conflict, rural versus urban divisions, and repressed political liberty. This in part explains why the conflict so rapidly evolved into an extremely violent sectarian conflict that has now lasted for seven years. The religious component of the conflict is primarily Sunni versus Alawite. However, many Sunnis in government-controlled cities support the Assad regime in order to withstand the influence of violent religious groups. With the influx of foreign radical Islamic fighters, the Syrian opposition has become increasingly “Islamized” and the civil war has taken on more and more the form of a *jihad* against the Syrian government. In the conflict, all Syrians are suffering greatly, but some groups are in a more vulnerable position than others.

One of the main features of Syria’s Christian population is its combined ethnic and religious identity. Particularly significant for understanding the position of Christians in the context of the current civil war is the concentration of Syria’s Christians in strategic areas of the country that are vital to both the government and the opposition war efforts, such as in and around the cities of Aleppo and Damascus, and in the southern areas of the Homs governorate near the Lebanese border. The geographical concentration of Christians in strategic areas is an important factor in their vulnerability, as is their alleged support to the government.

Other minorities suffering from various levels of persecution in Syria are: Yazidis and Zaradashtis. These are Kurdish religions which are not recognized by the regime. Their children are registered as Sunni

Muslims and they learn Islam in school. Presumably their situation was harder before the crisis, as Kurdish forces are taking control of their areas which gives them more freedom.

Christian communities and how they are affected

Three of the four WWL categories of Christianity exist in Syria and are affected by persecution related to the civil war.

Communities of expatriate Christians:

Expatriate Christians are present in Syria, but since they are not involuntarily isolated from other categories of Christian communities, they are not included as a separate category in the WWL analysis.

Historical Christian communities:

These are mostly Greek Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches. As the largest type of Christianity in the country, Christians from historical Christian communities are specifically targeted. They are spread over the entire country and are also present in conflict zones. Of this group, it is the leaders that are mostly affected, due to their public exposure. Clergy from historical churches are recognizable by their clothing which sometimes makes them a target. Historical Christian communities tend to be more recognizable in society than other types of Christianity, for instance by clearly recognizable churches and their members are socio-economically more connected to the state apparatus. The political reputation of denominations, churches and local church leaders plays an important role in the level of persecution or oppression they face from groups that are fighting President Assad. It is thus decisive how churches and Christians aligned themselves politically in the past – i.e. whether they were supportive of Assad, tried to stay neutral, distanced themselves from him or even opposed him.

Communities of converts to Christianity:

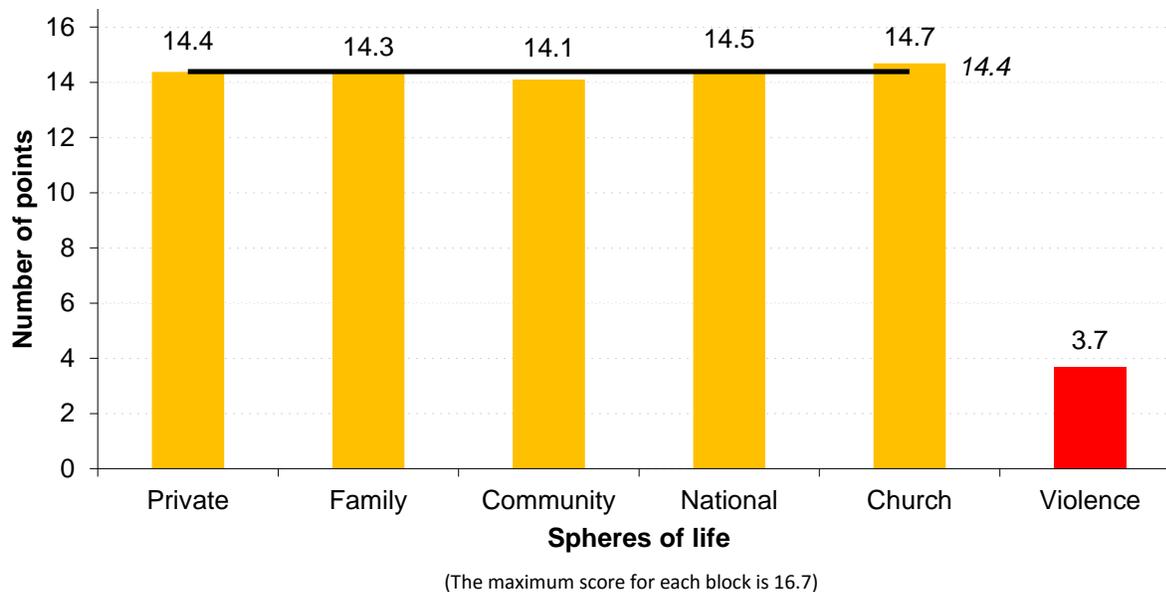
Christians from a Muslim or Druze background are especially put under pressure by their family, as it brings great dishonor to them if a family member leaves their religion. This is particular true in majority Sunni areas, where converts risk being banned from their families or worse. In a reaction to the increased radicalization of Islam, opposition from family and society towards converts from a Muslim background has increased particularly within rebel controlled areas. Pressure from the family is somewhat less intense in Kurdish areas, as the Kurdish Sunnis are generally less fundamentalist. Since the state authorities currently have other priorities to deal with, the slight governmental pressure on converts that there had been in earlier years, has diminished.

Non-traditional Christian communities:

Baptist, Evangelical and Pentecostal congregations are in a vulnerable position as they are known for their Western orientation, fragmentation, lack of strong leadership and lack of a foreign spokesperson (e.g. like a Pope or bishop) who can speak on their behalf.

Pressure in the 5 spheres of life and violence

WWL 2018 Persecution Pattern for Syria



The Persecution pattern shows:

- The average pressure on Christians over all *Spheres of life* is at an extreme level, but went down from 14.6 in WWL 2017 to 14.4. This decrease is mostly due to IS-controlled areas shrinking and also due to adjustments based on the availability of more information.
- Pressure in all *Spheres of life* is at an extreme level and was strongest in the *Church* (14.7), *National* (14.5) and *Private* (14.4) *spheres of life*. This is typical for a situation in which *Islamic oppression* is the main persecution engine, combined with *Dictatorial paranoia*.
- Pressure from *Islamic oppression* is present mostly in the *Private*, *Family* and *Community spheres* and is exerted by the social environment.
- The score for violence decreased from 13.7 in WWL 2017 to 3.7 – a difference of no less than 10 points. Less violent incidents were reported as the IS-areas shrunk further. Another factor is the difficulty of receiving verified information from a country in the chaos of civil war. Furthermore, unlike in WWL2017, there were no definite reports of Christians being killed for their faith, forcefully married or Christian owned shops and businesses being attacked. Of course this does not mean that anti-Christian violence has disappeared: Christians continued to be abducted or go missing, were physically and sexually abused, fled their homes and country and had their houses attacked – though not at the level of WWL2017.

- The overall situation in Syria is characterized by the persecution of all types of Christians in areas held by IS and Islamic militants and by pressure being put particularly on Christians with a Muslim background in the entire country.

Private sphere:

Pressure is especially strong in areas under the control of radical Islamic groups. All types of Christians are restricted in their personal worship of God, e.g. they cannot sing out loud. Under the influence of increased radical sentiments, converts in the entire country (especially in those areas controlled by radical Islamic groups, and with the exception of Kurdish areas) experience a higher level of pressure in their private religious observance.

Family sphere:

Converts face particular pressure in this *sphere of life*, if their new faith is known. However, this is slightly less intense in Kurdish areas. Also, converts are not able to change their religious identity in official documents except in the Kurdish regions where this was recently made possible. Furthermore, they cannot register (Christian) weddings, baptisms and burials. In IS-controlled areas, these issues are problematic for all types of Christianity. In the entire country, Christian spouses of Muslims are likely to be excluded from custody of children in cases of divorce.

Community sphere:

Community life is extremely limited for all types of Christianity in IS-controlled areas. If their faith is known, it is problematic for converts in the entire country. In IS-controlled areas all citizens (including Christians) have to abide by the Islamic dress code. Christians are forced to pay protection money and to keep commercial and dietary regulations, including a ban on alcohol.

National sphere:

Due to the fractured state of the country, there is now more impunity and inequality. In government-controlled areas, Christians are generally not discriminated against in national life. However, they may encounter glass ceilings in the public sector. Converts can be subjected to discrimination, if their faith is known. Evangelism and conversion from Islam are prohibited. In areas controlled by radical Muslim elements, all non-Muslims, including Christians, are treated as second-class citizens.

Church sphere:

In areas controlled by radical Islamic groups most churches have either been demolished or are used as Islamic centers. Public expressions of Christian faith are prohibited and church buildings or monasteries cannot be repaired or restored irrespective of whether the damage was collateral or intentional. In government-controlled areas, there is less monitoring of Christians due to the circumstances of war. In the entire country, marriages of Christians with a Muslim background are impossible and as such illegal.

Violence:

For several types of violent incidents which scored maximum points (10 cases or more) in WWL 2017, there were no confirmed reports available in the WWL 2018 reporting period. Obviously, this caused a

major shift in points. These violent incidents concern: killings, forced marriages and attacks on Christian owned shops and businesses. This does not mean that no such incidents happened, however. After the Syrian city of Qaryatayn was retaken from IS by Syrian government troops, it was found that IS had killed 128 people during the last days of their control of the previously majority Christian city. It is unknown how many of the victims - if any - were Christian. When IS first took control of the city in 2015, most Christians fled.

Some major incidents of the WWL 2018 reporting period are listed here:

- Six Christians were recorded as abducted or missing. Among them were the Syrian Orthodox Archbishop Yohanna Ibrahim, Greek Orthodox Archbishop Paul Yazigi and Jesuit priest Paolo Dall'Oglio (all kidnapped in 2013). Their condition and whereabouts remain unknown and they were recorded as missing in persecution-related context. In November 2017, an Iraqi Assyrian woman was liberated by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) after being abducted by IS for three years and moved between Mosul and Raqqa.¹⁵¹
- The above mentioned Iraqi Assyrian woman was physically and sexually abused multiple times, and was sold to four different IS militants. It is likely that more Christian women and girls have had to face such treatment. The Iraqi woman was daily beaten and tortured by the third militant's wife until she bled. Also, she was regularly threatened with death if she did not convert to Islam.
- Militants reportedly seized or attacked houses of Christians in Idlib and in the Christian quarters of Aleppo. Their motives are likely to have been both political and religious.
- Dozens of Christians with a Muslim background were reportedly forced to be relocated either inside or outside the country for reasons of faith. A Christian woman with a Druze background from the southern Syrian province of Sweida is currently hiding in Lebanon. When she converted her young daughter was taken away from her and her family threatened to kill her. Also, believers of other Christian communities are known to have left the country for different reasons, including insecurity due to war.

Gender profile of persecution

Female:

Women and girls from religious minority groups, including Christians, risk sexual harassment and rape. This can happen both in government-controlled areas and in rebel-held territory, though the threat is higher in and near the latter. In both areas, female converts can be abducted and/or forced to marry Muslims. Kidnapped Christian women and girls have been married off to IS fighters, sometimes to several fighters per Christian. IS published a message in their magazine that Christian and Yezidi women may be treated as "spoils of war". Many of them are raped. There are credible reports on rape being used as a weapon of war to induce intimidation, regardless of one's faith, although religion can be an additional motivation.

¹⁵¹ See: <http://www.aina.org/news/20171130120807.htm>, last accessed 13 December 2017.

Not only Islamic militant groups constitute a threat for Christian women and girls. For female converts violence can come from their own families if their new faith is discovered. Women are particularly vulnerable to the Islamic culture of honor and shame. Leaving Islam is a great taboo and seriously violates family honor. This includes assaults and honor-killing risks. Moreover there is limited protection from family violence in practice (if not in law) for women and girls in general. According to Sharia law, a Muslim woman is not allowed to legally marry a Christian man (vice versa is possible). This makes marriages between female Christians with a Muslim background and men from other categories of Christian communities legally impossible.

Female converts from Islam to Christianity married to a Muslim risk divorce, particularly if their conversion becomes known to in-laws. In that case, they are very likely to be excluded from having custody over their children. In cases of divorce, other Christian women married to a Muslim also face the risk of losing their children. Although the attitude of the wider family is crucial, there is always a risk of losing custody to relatives as this issue falls under Sharia law which gives the right to the Muslim spouse. Also, Christian women can only inherit from their Muslim men, if they convert to Islam. This is especially problematic for Christian women married to Muslims or to male Christians with a Muslim background, who are still considered Muslims by Sharia law. As a result of the above described situation, it is very hard for female converts and Christian women married to Muslims to raise a stable family.

Male:

In Syria there is enforced military service for all men reaching the age of 18. Some Christians are conscientious objectors and this can prompt consideration of emigration.

The persecution of Christian men affects their families considerably, particularly if they are killed or abducted as the family might well lack any income and be unable to afford basic needs. In Syrian culture the men are the main provider for the family.

Future outlook

With Islamic State's three year siege of Deir el-Zour broken and the liberation of "IS capital" Raqqa, the end of the civil war in Syria might be near, according to security think-tank Stratfor.¹⁵² Meanwhile, political solutions to the conflict are still a long way off. The Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) summarizes Syria's current situation and expectations for the next few years as follows: "The Assad regime has forged a semi-continuous area under its control encompassing western Syria. However, it may struggle to consolidate its recent military victories, not least because of a sudden shift in US policy towards the regime, which culminated in military action against Assad's airbases on April 7th [2017]. In any case, despite a ceasefire in December [2016], differences over the future of Bashar al-Assad and the exclusion of several rebel

¹⁵² See: <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/2017-second-quarter-forecast/middle-east-and-north-africa>, last accessed 17 September 2017.

groups will prevent a lasting political solution.”¹⁵³ Obviously the loss of IS-held territory means significant liberation for people living in the concerned areas. Nevertheless, this does not necessarily mean that the presence of the persecution engine *Islamic oppression* will weaken considerably. It is expected that IS will increase its terror activities – in the Middle East and elsewhere – to show that it is still a relevant factor in world politics. In a revenge action, IS carried out a car bombing in Homs in December 2017 in which many were killed, including two Christians. But IS is not the only driver of this engine which is also boosted by jihadist militant components of the Sunni opposition. Their role is still not finished yet. In the civil war, the tribal identity of rural Syria in particular is an important factor used by the different national and international power players. As a result, the different tribes have become very fragmented and have even turned into competing clans, which can force people to rely on their own specific tribe even more. In such circumstances, tribal values - mostly based on Islam - offer security and become increasingly important. This strengthening of the engine *Ethnic antagonism* will certainly not lessen the pressure families and communities exert on converts - a situation which is not expected to change for the better in the short run.

From the side of the Syrian regime, Christians do not have to fear much in terms of monitoring as the government is still too busy combatting opposition forces and this is not likely to change soon. The most important drivers of the engine *Dictatorial paranoia* are thus the armed opposition groups in areas under their control. Some have joined forces to form a national opposition army. This could lead to a major and decisive clash with the government army, a situation which can put greater pressure than before on all religious minorities, including Christians – for instance, when it comes to choosing sides.

Finally, the influence of the persecution engine *Organized corruption and crime*, in the form of ransom for kidnapped Christians seems to have decreased according to in-country researchers. However, it has certainly not disappeared altogether, particularly in some majority Alawite villages in central Syria where young Alawites steal cars or kidnap Christians after sunset at their villages’ unofficial checkpoints. Therefore, many Christians stay in their villages after dark. Though the registered number of abductions of Christians has decreased generally, in a country where society is built on corruption and where rule of law is lacking in many places, this persecution engine is not expected to weaken considerably in the foreseeable future.

Policy considerations

Open Doors suggests the following recommendations:

- The Syrian government – or any future post-settlement government, should ensure future legal frameworks in the countries fully promote and protect the equal and inalienable rights of all their citizens, irrespective of race, religion or other status. Thereby:

¹⁵³ See: <http://country.eiu.com/syria>, last accessed 12 December 2017.

- Endorsing by law the creation of a National Accountability Mechanism to monitor instances of discrimination based on religious or ethnic belonging, and to ensure accountability for violations.
- Fully applying Article 14 of the Iraqi Constitution which recognizes and upholds the equal rights and status of people of all religions before the law without discrimination.
- The international community and local governments should ensure the dignified and continued improvement of living conditions for all citizens, but especially for the refugees and internally displaced – including the provision of adequate housing, education and jobs. Thereby:
 - Instigate and encouraging flexible funding opportunities to allow a variety of well-coordinated, non-partisan, in-country Faith and Community Based Organizations (FBOs/CBOs), such as churches and mosques, to provide access to food, safe drinking water and essential medical supplies; regain normality by initiating a variety of locally-appropriate psycho-social care, reconciliation and community-building projects amongst the displaced; and initiate rehabilitation and reconstruction activities, such as housing repair and income-generating projects. EU delegations and large NGO consortia managing local calls for proposals and funding should include faith-based organizations and religious leaders in their increased engagement with local CBOs and minority aid organizations.
 - Ensuring that the government discourse and education curricula in Syria affirms religiously pluralistic society which promotes tolerance, respect and peaceful coexistence between people of all religions and ethnicities.
 - All donors, the EU and its Member States ensuring they fulfil commitments to deliver humanitarian assistance swiftly, and with the express inclusion of local civil society and faith-based groups and aid organizations.
- The international community along with the local government should identify and equip religious leaders and faith-based organizations to play a constructive and central role in reconciling and rebuilding Iraqi society, thereby:
 - Supporting the establishment of a grass-roots Peace Programme, with projects run by faith-based organisations and other active civil society organisations. The programme should support and equip existing peacebuilding and reconciliation initiatives in Syria and Iraq, and promote the valuable role of civil society in restoring peace to both countries.
 - help the population regain normality by initiating a variety of locally-appropriate psycho-social care, reconciliation and community-building projects amongst the displaced;
 - initiate rehabilitation and reconstruction activities, such as housing repair and income-generating projects.
- All donors from the EU and its member states should ensure they fulfil commitments to deliver humanitarian assistance swiftly, and with the express inclusion of local civil society and faith-based groups and aid-organizations.⁷
- The international community should ensure follow-up reporting on EU member state responses to the call by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and by the European Parliament to undertake a stronger commitment to finding protection for refugees fleeing persecution on

religious or ethnic grounds through resettlement, humanitarian admission schemes, simplified family reunification or more flexible visa regulations.

- The European Parliament and UN should continually monitor and report on atrocities committed against Christians.

The EU External Action Service (EEAS), EU Member States and European Commission should respond urgently to the European Parliament Resolution calling for a repatriation plan for religious groups.

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16. Uzbekistan

Reporting period: 1 November 2016 - 31 October 2017

Position on World Watch List (WWL)

WWL 2018: Points: 73 / Position: 16

WWL 2017: Points: 71 / Position: 16

WWL 2016: Points: 70 / Position: 15

With a score of 73 points, Uzbekistan ranks 16th on WWL 2018, a 2 point rise in comparison to WWL 2017. Despite the change in government leadership, little has changed for Christians in Uzbekistan. Christians continue to suffer from a high level of control by the authoritarian government – especially in the *Private* and *Church spheres of life*.

Persecution engines

Persecution engines ¹⁵⁴ in Uzbekistan	
Islamic oppression	Strong
Religious nationalism	Not at all
Ethnic antagonism	Not at all
Denominational protectionism	Very Weak
Communist and post-Communist oppression	Not at all
Secular intolerance	Not at all
Dictatorial paranoia	Very Strong
Organized corruption and crime	Weak

¹⁵⁴ The scale for the level of influence of Persecution engines and Drivers in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong.

Dictatorial paranoia (Very strong):

No religious activities beyond state-run and state-controlled institutions are allowed. Mainstream Protestants are frequently branded as “extremists” for their practice of religion outside state-sanctioned structures. It is very common that members of Protestant churches are regarded as followers of an alien sect that has only one goal, namely to spy on and destroy the current political system. From this perspective they need to be not only controlled, but if necessary, even eradicated. Security forces have stepped up monitoring measures in order to find “extremists”. This has also affected Christians and churches.

Islamic oppression (Strong):

If indigenous citizens (who are Muslim) convert to Christianity, they are likely to experience pressure and occasionally physical violence from their families, friends and local community to force them to return to their former faith. Some converts are locked up by their families for long periods, beaten and may eventually be expelled from their communities. Local mullahs preach against them, so adding pressure. As a result, converts will do their best to hide their faith – they become so-called secret believers.

Drivers of persecution

Drivers of persecution in Uzbekistan	
Government officials at any level from local to national	Very Strong
Ethnic group leaders	Medium
Non-Christian religious leaders at any level from local to national	Medium
Christian religious leaders at any level from local to national	Very Weak
Violent religious groups	Very Weak
Ideological pressure groups	Not at all
Normal citizens (people from the general public), including mobs	Medium
Own (extended) family	Very Strong
Political parties at any level from local to national	Strong
Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups	Not at all
Organized crime cartels or networks	Very Weak
Multilateral organizations (e.g. UN) and embassies	Not at all

Government officials and *Political parties* are the drivers that can be linked directly with the persecution engine *Dictatorial paranoia*. They form the oppression that comes from the authorities. The *extended family*, *ethnic group leaders*, *non-Christian religious leaders* and *normal citizens* are the drivers that can be connected to the oppression by the Islamic environment especially on Christians with a Muslim background. These drivers are linked with the persecution engine *Islamic oppression*.

Context

Uzbekistan has one of the harshest dictatorships in Central Asia. The regime will do everything possible to stay in power – all forms of opposition and deviations from the norm will be ruthlessly attacked. This has not changed since the death of President Islam Karimov on 2 September 2016. Christianity is regarded as an alien and destabilizing factor. On top of this, Christians with a Muslim background experience additional pressure from their social and cultural environment.

The government uses the existence of radical Islamic groups to justify its total control over society by claiming that these are a constant threat to the country – a claim that is grossly exaggerated. So far, few, if any, jihadists have returned to Uzbekistan from the battlefields in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan.

The secret police closely monitors all religious activities in the country and informers have infiltrated all religious groups. House church meetings are often targeted for raids, and those present are then harassed, detained, interrogated and fined; religious materials found on the premises will be confiscated and destroyed. Short sentences of up to 15 days imprisonment are common for Christians detained by police. Only rarely are believers given sentences for long-term imprisonment.

Christians are not the only religious group that is persecuted in Uzbekistan. All religious groups are treated the same - Christians do not get 'special' treatment. Examples of other persecuted groups are some Muslim groups and Jehovah's Witnesses.

Christian communities and how they are affected

Communities of expatriate Christians:

There are no communities of expatriate Christians in Uzbekistan to be included in WWL analysis.

Historical Christian communities:

The Russian Orthodox Church has accustomed itself to the limitations provided by the government and is therefore more or less left undisturbed. Services may be monitored, but they are conducted unhindered and members can meet without fear of arrest. However, the printing or importing of Christian materials is restricted.

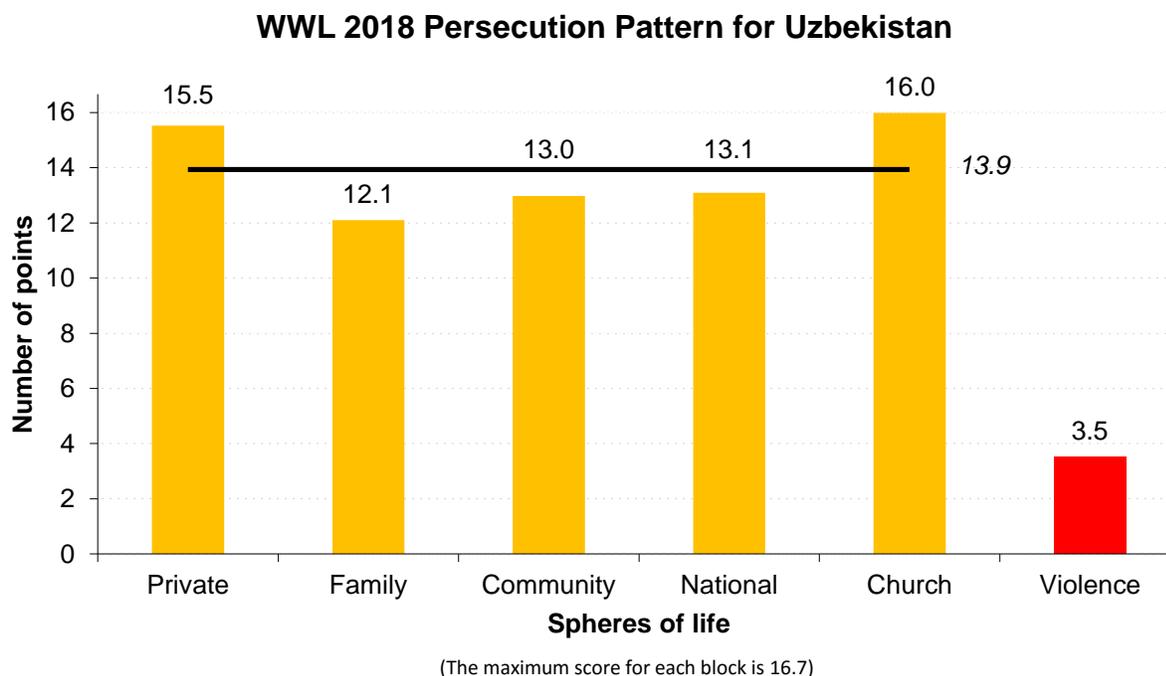
Communities of converts to Christianity:

Christian converts from a Muslim background bear the brunt of the persecution in Uzbekistan. Apart from suffering at the hands of the state, they are also under strong pressure from family, friends and community. And for them, the latter is by far the more powerful.

Non-traditional Christian communities:

After converts, this category of Christians is the second most persecuted group - and especially when the churches have not been registered. Baptist, Evangelical and Pentecostal groups suffer from raids, threats, arrests, and fines.

Pressure in the 5 spheres of life and violence



The Persecution pattern for Uzbekistan shows:

- The average pressure on Christians in Uzbekistan is 13.9, an increase of 0.5 over the WWL 2017 reporting period.
- Pressure is extreme in the *Church sphere* (16.0 points) and in the *Private sphere* - especially for converts from Islam (15.5 points). This can be linked directly with the two Persecution engines that are present in Uzbekistan: *Dictatorial paranoia* and *Islamic oppression*.
- The score for violence is 3.5 points which is 0.7 points lower than in WWL 2017. The reason for this decrease is simply that fewer violent incidents were reported.

Private sphere:

Conversion is the issue that triggers the fiercest reaction from the social and cultural environment. It is regarded as a shameful affront to the honor of the family. As it creates social unrest, it is also high on the radar of the state and its agents. Neighbors will go to the police if they see a Christian convert worshipping at home. In some areas it is illegal to own a Bible, elsewhere one Bible is allowed. Revealing one's adherence to the Christian faith (e.g. by displaying Christian symbols) is also risky. Not only is it risky for a convert to talk about his new faith with members of the family, the same goes for members of Historical

churches who have joined non-traditional churches, though this is far less acute. House arrests are quite common for Christians from a Muslim background – the family will use this to put pressure on them to give up their new faith.

Family sphere:

Christians with a Muslim background may experience problems when trying to register births, deaths and marriages at the local authorities, as the officials are often Muslims from the local community. There are examples of Christian burials being denied by local officials. The pressure on converts not to go through with baptism is immense as it is often regarded as the ultimate sign that one has left Islam. In Uzbek families, relatives (grandfather, grandmother for example) may force a child to go to the mosque, despite the fact that his parents are Christians. Because of the frequent propaganda against "sects" in the media, schools and colleges, young people are often hostile towards the children of evangelical Christians. There are cases where spouses have been forced to seek refuge in another country when the other half was detained. In such cases, the family is separated for a long time. There have been cases where spouses are put under pressure to divorce.

Community sphere:

Threats and obstructions may come to Christians from more than one source. First of all, converts face pressure from their relatives and community, but other Christians (especially those active in evangelism) may also face threats from the local community and from the authorities. Two groups are responsible for the surveillance of Christians: the relatives/community (as a form of social control), but also the authorities at various levels. If an employer realizes that an employee is an active Christian, the latter can be fired on the spot. The NSS (Uzbek Intelligence Service) is known to blackmail Christian owners of shops. There is a long list of offences for which Christians can – and frequently do – receive fines: e.g. for meeting illegally, for possessing religious literature, or for having Christian songs on their smartphones. Known believers will be required to go to the local police station from time to time just to intimidate them.

National sphere:

The constitution and some laws provide for religious freedom but not without serious restrictions. The state is monitoring active pastors. When meetings or houses are raided, all those present will be interrogated - often very harshly. Citizens need an exit visa to leave the country, and known Christians are sometimes refused such visas. They also cannot currently get a position in state employment. For all Christians not belonging to the Russian Orthodox Church, expressing Christian views in public can lead to threats of reprisals from both the government and the local Uzbek community. State-controlled media regularly produce reports attacking evangelical Christians. Billboards, leaflets and other public information about the danger of sects and missionaries appeared in the north of the country in the reporting period. Fair trials do not occur in Uzbekistan. The judiciary is not independent and the international monitoring of court cases involving Christians faces many political hurdles.

Church sphere:

Christian gatherings are frequently hindered and raided. It is almost impossible to register as a new church – for the past 16 years not a single new church has been registered. All religious activities are closely

watched. It is almost impossible to get permission to build new church premises and the maintenance of existing buildings is made very difficult (except for the Russian Orthodox Church). The few churches that are registered may organize activities inside their premises only; activities outside these premises are forbidden. Many churches avoid using visible Christian symbols in order to prevent conflicts. Under the Religion Law all religious materials need to be subjected to the government for approval. In practice this means that all importing, printing, and distribution is blocked. Charitable work is highly restricted, only the Russian Orthodox Church may organize this. A 2003 decree of the Cabinet of Ministers outlining a change in registration requirements for NGOs restricted the activities of faith-based entities, and the 1998 Religion Law prohibits "actions aimed at converting believers of one religion into another (proselytizing) as well as any other missionary activity".

Violence:

There were relatively few violent incidents recorded in Uzbekistan. No Christians were killed and no churches were destroyed or damaged. However, 15 Christians were detained and about 10 of them were sentenced to short terms of imprisonment. 11 Christian women were reported to have suffered from sexual harassment (physical or verbal) by police officers. More than 10 Christians suffered from physical violence more than 10 properties of Christians (houses etc.) were damaged. More than 10 Christians had to stay in safe houses – most of these were Christians with a Muslim background. At least one individual (a Russian woman) was deported for having met with other Protestants at a service in Tashkent.

Further examples:

- The Uzbek government has a special department for monitoring religious activity and censoring religious literature.
- It is difficult to register new churches and the registration rules for already existing religious communities have become more difficult.
- On 24 March 2017 state officials raided a flat in Tashkent where five Protestant women were meeting to discuss the Christian faith. Books, computer and camera were confiscated. The group leader was fined five times the minimum monthly wage by a District Criminal Court in April 2017 for "carrying out an unauthorized religious activity". According to local sources, one of the women present may have been an informer for the authorities. (Source: [Forum 18](#)¹⁵⁵)

Gender profile of persecution

Female:

In Uzbekistan the daily life of indigenous people is based on Islamic culture which puts women in an inferior position compared to men. Total submission is expected from women to their parents and if married - to their husbands. This makes them more vulnerable to persecution - both as Christians and as women who challenge the existing order. Christian women and girls are suffering from verbal and physical abuse,

¹⁵⁵ See: http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2280, last accessed 15 December 2017.

threats, beatings, detention, interrogation, confiscation, fines, imprisonment, job loss, discrimination, excommunication, home detention, forced marriage, family violence and rape, shaming, excommunication, divorce, loss of possessions.

Male:

Church leaders are normally men; they are also normally the heads of their family and the main bread winners. When a Christian man becomes a target of persecution - fined or imprisoned - his whole family will suffer. Losing jobs will affect the whole family. If a man is a church leader his persecution will affect his church and cause fear. Christian men and boys suffer from verbal and physical abuse, threats, beatings, detention, interrogation, confiscation, fines, imprisonment, job loss, discrimination, excommunication, home detention, shaming, pleading, excommunication, divorce, loss of possessions.

Future outlook

Uzbek President Islam Karimov died on 2 September 2016. He was quickly succeeded by Prime Minister Shavkat Mirziyaev. It is unlikely that this will bring any form of change for Christians in the country: State bodies (police, secret services, *mahalla* local authorities) will continue to monitor religious activities by various means (bugging homes, tapping phones, infiltrating groups, visiting church services etc.). Raids on house-church groups, the confiscation of religious materials and the interrogation and detention of Christians are likely to continue as before. Pressure on and violence against converts from family, friends and community is also likely to continue, if not increase.

Policy considerations

Open Doors suggests the following recommendations be made:

- The international community, UN Human Rights Council and Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) should strongly denounce and call for a repeal of the amendments to the Criminal and Administrative Code ratified 26 April 2016, which make it possible to punish those who publish, disseminate and broadcast allegedly extremist religious materials with prison terms of between five and eight years with possible fines of 300 to 400 times the minimum monthly wage. The laws have been used to target Muslims and other religious groups.
- The OSCE should call the government of Uzbekistan to account, insisting that it complies with commitments to combat violent extremism and terrorism by adopting a human rights-based approach. Criminal Code Article 244-1 should specify which “religious extremist or terrorist groups” are meant in order to remove the possibility of targeting any religious group at will on this legal basis.
- As part of the New Partnership Agreement with Central Asia, the EU should, alongside OSCE and UN participants, press the government of Uzbekistan to cease all religious censorship and torture,

and decriminalize by law the possession of religious literature and its dissemination. Full freedom of religious belief should be enshrined in law and guaranteed in practice.

- The prohibitive registration requirements for religious associations should be abolished, and the monitoring of religious activities that do not threaten national security should cease. This concerns specifically: Administrative Code Article 240 ("Violation of the Religion Law", dating from 1998) and the 2003 decree that restricts the activities of faith-based NGOs should be repealed.

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17. Egypt

Reporting period: 1 November 2016 - 31 October 2017

Position on World Watch List (WWL)

WWL 2018: Points: 70 / Position: 17

WWL 2017: Points: 65 / Position: 21

WWL 2016: Points: 64 / Position: 22

Egypt rises 5 points and takes Rank 17 on WWL 2018. The significant rise in score is attributable to the overall rise in pressure in all *Spheres of life*. The score for violence remains at an extreme level (although lower than in WWL 2017) due to the much publicized violent attacks against Christians in the WWL 2018 reporting period. The fear and pressure created by these attacks in combination with a campaign of terrorizing Christians affected almost all areas of Christian life in Egypt.

Persecution engines

Persecution engines in Egypt ¹⁵⁶ :	
Islamic oppression	Very strong
Religious nationalism	Not at all
Ethnic antagonism	Not at all
Denominational protectionism	Medium
Communist and post-Communist oppression	Not at all
Secular intolerance	Not at all
Dictatorial paranoia	Medium
Organized corruption and crime	Weak

¹⁵⁶ The scale for the level of influence of Persecution engines and Drivers in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong.

Islamic oppression (Very strong):

In Egypt, *Islamic oppression* operates in different ways. Islamic culture sustains a view in Egyptian society whereby Christians are regarded as second-class citizens. This view causes the discrimination of Christians in the political realm and their dealing with the state. It also creates an environment in which the state is reluctant to respect and enforce the fundamental rights of Christians. In the family sphere, converts to Christianity face great pressure to renounce their faith. Christians also face pressure from *Islamic oppression* in their daily lives in their local neighborhood or at work. There have also been several violent attacks perpetrated by militant Islamic groups targeting Christians. Although the activity of such militant groups used to be largely concentrated in Sinai, during the WWL 2018 reporting period the number of attacks perpetrated by such groups in various parts of the country has increased.

Dictatorial paranoia (Medium):

The tradition of authoritarian rule is perhaps the only permanent feature in Egypt's political system, which experienced three regime changes in just three years (2011-2014). All of Egypt's rulers have had an authoritarian government style. In 2011, Mubarak's long dictatorship was ended through massive social protests, which eventually led to the controversial election of the Muslim Brotherhood. The government led by Mohamed Morsi did not behave democratically and was ousted by a national uprising supported by the army in 2013. Currently, Egypt is ruled by a civilian government led by former army chief Abdul Fatah al-Sisi, after a presidential election in May 2014. This government seems to regard basic human rights and democratic pluralism as a low priority in view of the huge current economic, political, social and security challenges. In this context, therefore, religious freedom for Christians is not fully guaranteed.

Denominational protectionism (Medium):

The majority of Christians in Egypt are Coptic Orthodox Christians. They view Evangelicals, to a great extent, as a community of splinter-groups and dissidents opposing the mother church. It is not an exaggeration to even say that many Orthodox Christians consider Evangelical theology to be occult. Evangelical marriages, baptisms and funerals are not recognized by the Orthodox Church. There are even many Orthodox bishops and priests who speak and write openly and aggressively against the theology and activities of the local Evangelical churches. Evangelistic events planned by the Evangelical churches in the villages face severe opposition from the local Orthodox churches, as is the case also in the cities. Those who switch their denomination from Orthodox to another Christian denomination also face pressure and possible ostracization from their relatives and family members.

Drivers of persecution

Drivers of persecution in Egypt	
Government officials at any level from local to national	Strong
Ethnic group leaders	Not at All
Non-Christian religious leaders at any level from local to national	Very Strong
Christian religious leaders at any level from local to national	Weak
Violent religious groups	Very Strong

Ideological pressure groups	Not at all
Normal citizens (people from the general public), including mobs	Very Strong
Own (extended) family	Strong
Political parties at any level from local to national	Medium
Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups	Weak
Organized crime cartels or networks	Weak
Multilateral organizations (e.g. UN) and embassies	Weak

Drivers for Islamic oppression

Ordinary people whose views are shaped by intolerant and radical imams are significant drivers of persecution and contribute the lion's share of the pressure that Christians face in their daily lives in their local neighborhoods and at work. Societal hostility and prejudice against Christians are more pronounced in the poorer and rural parts of the country. Radical Islamic preachers who propagate hatred also play a crucial role in sustaining the environment of intolerance and fueling hostility against Christians. Militant Islamic groups (such as the Islamic State group) are also significant drivers of persecution and are responsible for many of the most violent and gruesome acts of violent persecution. Government officials also act as drivers of persecution through their failure to vindicate the rights of Christians and also through their discriminatory acts which violate the fundamental rights of Christians.

Drivers for Dictatorial paranoia

Government officials, including judicial officers, local administrative officials as well those belonging to various branches of the security apparatus in Egypt are the principal drivers here. The administration of President Abdul Fatah al-Sisi is attempting to shore up its support with the majority of the population and hold on to power. Thus, despite its promises to the contrary, the government has actually maintained existing restrictions on the freedom of religion of Egyptian Christians. Church leaders in Egypt are also constantly monitored and under surveillance by the state.

Context

In contemporary Egypt, the revolution against President Mubarak in 2011 and the ouster of his successor, President Morsi in 2013 are considered to be defining moments for the nation. The tendency of President Morsi to exclude from government and matters of public affair various political factions within the country, as well as the widespread perception that his administration was incompetent, led to popular demonstrations against his rule. Ultimately, the army intervened and ousted President Morsi and paved the way for the emergence of Field-Marshal Abdul Fattah al-Sisi as the new Egyptian strong man. Al-Sisi was hailed by many as a hero who saved Egypt from the clutches of the Muslim Brotherhood, while others contend that his rule is a sure sign of Egypt's return to the old days of autocracy backed by the army. Since al-Sisi's rise to power, many of the Muslim Brotherhood's senior leaders, including Morsi, have been detained, prosecuted and sentenced to death or life imprisonment. None of the death sentences were executed so far, though. These measures have deeply polarized Egyptian society since the Muslim Brotherhood is popular among a large segment of Egyptian society.

The revolution against Mubarak’s regime began out of discontent with the socio-economic situation of the country and was promoted mostly by urban youth. Around 40% of the population lives under the poverty level of \$2 a day. Egypt is also one of nine countries with the highest illiteracy rates in the world, with adult illiteracy at more than 30%. President al-Sisi’s administration has embarked upon an ambitious plan to revitalize the Egyptian economy and create much needed economic growth and jobs. Initially the government’s plan found many international backers, especially from the oil-rich Gulf States, but the political and security crises in Egypt and the surrounding region seem to have frustrated these efforts.

Islam is the most dominant religion in Egypt. Just under 90% of the population is estimated to be Muslim and virtually all Egyptian Muslims are Sunni Muslims. Although Christianity has deep roots in Egypt going back centuries before the advent of Islam in North Africa, Christians are often marginalized and treated as second class citizens in modern Egypt. President al-Sisi has called upon scholars at Al-Azhar University (considered to be the oldest and the most prestigious center of advanced Islamic studies among Sunni Muslims) to fight radicalism and introduce reforms in Islamic teaching. In rural and impoverished areas in particular, radical imams and less tolerant brands of Islam are growing in prominence. The government is making efforts to reverse this trend, but has not been very successful so far. The environment remains hostile for Christians in Egypt.

Other religious groups facing persecution in Egypt include Shia Muslims, Bahai, Mormons and Jehovah’s Witnesses. Shia Muslims are particularly targeted by radical Sunni militants, making it dangerous for them to worship and practice their faith openly. Mormons, Bahai and Jehovah’s Witnesses are denied recognition by the authorities, hence making it difficult for them to have places of worship. The missionary zeal and corresponding activities of such groups are considered illegal and thus adherents face hostility both from state officials and society, including Christian Egyptians.

Christian communities and how they are affected

Communities of expatriate Christians:

Communities of expatriate Christians do not exist in Egypt as a separate WWL category.

Historical Christian communities:

The largest church in this category is the ethnic Coptic community, most of whom are Orthodox. There are also established Protestant denominations throughout the country. The large Coptic minority, while facing important difficulties (including discrimination in education, health and government legislation that hinders essential aspects of church life), has been tolerated by the state and the Muslim majority in the country because of its historical presence and its demographic size (estimated at 10 – 11 million). In recent years, this has changed, however, causing historical Christian communities to be targeted both by their neighbors and by radical Islamic groups.

Communities of converts to Christianity:

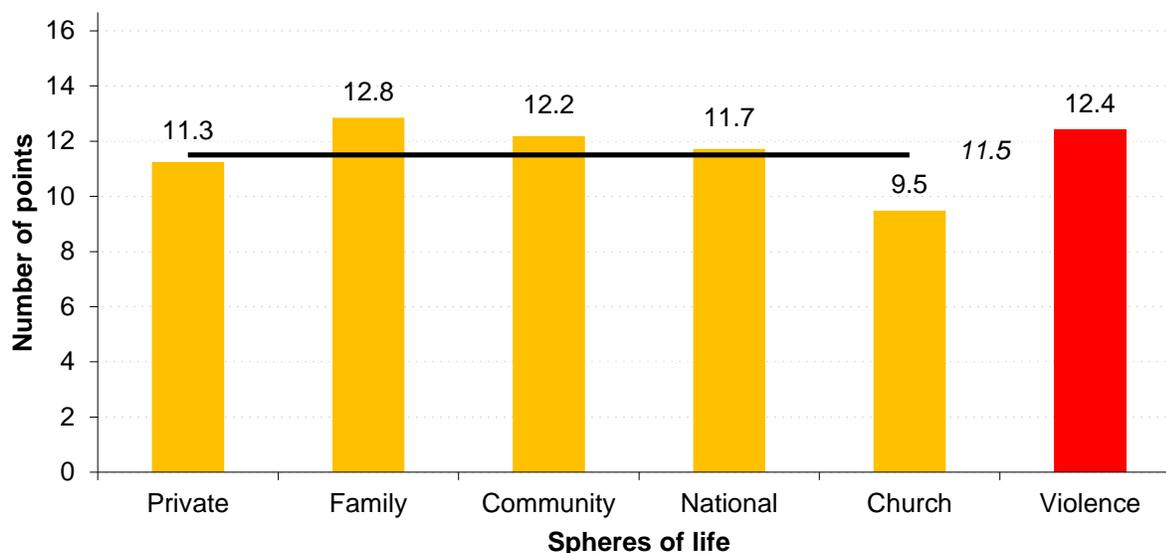
There is a small but growing community of Christian converts who bear the brunt of persecution, most often from family members. The latter punish converts for abandoning the Islamic faith, often by means of beatings or house expulsion. Both Christians with a Muslim background and Coptic Christians are to be found throughout the country, although there are concentrations of Coptic Christians in Upper Egypt, Cairo and Alexandria. The levels of persecution are comparable throughout the country. Converts often form non-traditional Christian groups.

Non-traditional Christian communities:

These are not reported as a separate category in Egypt according to WWL methodology.

Pressure in the 5 spheres of life and violence

WWL 2018 Persecution Pattern for Egypt



(The maximum score for each block is 16.7)

The Persecution pattern shows:

- Pressure on Christians increased in every *Sphere of life*, causing the average pressure to rise from 9.7 in WWL 2017 to 11.5.
- Pressure is very high in all but the *Church sphere* (which experiences high pressure). Pressure is strongest in the *Family sphere* and *Community sphere*.
- The score for violence is still at an extreme level (12.4), although it is lower than the 16.1 points scored in WWL 2017. The lower score is due to a lower number of Christians being detained and less churches being demolished. However, in terms of the number of Christians killed, the situation in WWL 2018 was worse.

Private sphere:

Converts face severe limitations within their homes. Any act of private worship as a Christian is risky and there is a lot of pressure on them to take part in the daily Islamic prayer or in the Ramadan fast and other Islamic faith obligations. Unlike Christians with a Muslim background, Coptic Christians face little or no pressure in this sphere.

Family Sphere:

Especially in rural areas, converts from Islam face an enormous amount of pressure from their immediate and extended family to renounce their Christian faith. Within the large Coptic community, pressure in this sphere is much lower, but the pressure on converts can even include physical assault and even death-threats.

Community sphere:

Egyptian Christians are often victims of social exclusion. Country researchers report that Christians face constant discrimination in areas such as justice, education, basic social services and are generally more vulnerable to poverty. In addition, Christians are denied justice when they are forced to submit disputes to “customary-law sessions”, especially in cases of disputes between Muslims and Christians. This alternative form of justice almost always leads to unfair decisions to which Christians communities are particularly vulnerable.

National sphere:

Religious freedom is not upheld by the state and the Egyptian legal system is biased against non-Muslims. The legal system treats Christians, especially converts as second class citizens and limits their individual and collective ability to exercise their freedom of religion and live in accordance with their faith.

Church sphere:

The autonomy of the Coptic Orthodox Church is generally respected, although Christians do face administrative obstacles, such as difficulties in obtaining permits to renovate or build church buildings. These hurdles have become even more intractable since a law passed in 2016 gives arbitrary powers to provincial officials with regard to permits needed to construct churches.

Violence:

The level of violence against Christians in Egypt has become more visible in the WWL 2018 reporting period. Attacks by militants that target Christians have increased both in terms of their frequency and deadliness. However, there was a decline in violence by ordinary people and a lower number of Christians arrested. The threats and attacks by militants were deliberately staged to terrorize the Christian community and disturb the activities of churches. For example:

- On 12 December 2016 a suicide bomb attack on St. Peter’s church in Cairo resulted in the death of around 30 and the injury of dozens of [worshippers](#)¹⁵⁷.

¹⁵⁷ See: <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/12/11/middleeast/egypt-coptic-church/index.html>, last accessed 9 December 2017.

- In February 2017, the Islamic State group released a [propaganda video](#)¹⁵⁸, vowing to wipe out Egypt’s Coptic Christians and “liberate Cairo”.
- 45 people died and 100 people were injured as a result of two suicide bomb attacks against churches in the cities of Tanta and Alexandria on 9 April 2017 ([Palm Sunday](#)).¹⁵⁹ The Islamic State group claimed responsibility.
- On 25 May 2017, 30 Christians (or 35 according to some reports) were killed and 28 wounded by gunmen while they were traveling to a [monastery](#).¹⁶⁰ The gunmen tried to force their victims to convert to Islam before they opened fire.
- On 19 July 2017, an Egyptian Christian soldier was beaten to death at the Al-Salaam Special Forces [unit](#).¹⁶¹ Reports indicate that he was killed because he failed to comply with the order of his captain to remove tattoos of a cross and Christians saints.
- More than 1,600 Coptic Christians live in the village of Kom El-Loufy in Minya. For 5 years they have been unable to reopen their church or build a new one due to fierce hostility from local Muslims and due to the refusal by the authorities to grant the necessary license for the construction of a church in the [village](#).¹⁶² Several houses belonging to Christians had also been burned down due to suspicions that they could serve as places of worship for Christians.

Gender profile of persecution

Female:

Women are often subjected to harassment, forced marriage or marriage by abduction and sexual assault. Although such abuses are common practices that affect women in Egypt. There have been reports that Christian women are particularly targeted for marriage by [abduction](#).¹⁶³ Many of the Christian girls who are lured in to marriage are underage and come from power and vulnerable families. Such persecution causes great physiological trauma and pain to Christian families and communities.

Male:

No separate information available.

¹⁵⁸ See: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2017/02/islamic-state-threatens-to-wipe-out-egypts-copts/>, last accessed 9 December 2017.

¹⁵⁹ See: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/04/12/egypt-horrific-palm-sunday-bombings>

¹⁶⁰ See: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2017/05/gunmen-kill-35-egyptian-christians-ascension-day-bus-attack/>, last accessed 9 December 2017

¹⁶¹ See: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2017/08/egypt-second-copt-two-years-dies-mysteriously-army-unit-time-first-day/>, last accessed 9 December 2017.

¹⁶² See: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2017/07/copts-kom-el-loufy-still-no-church-village-not-alone/>

¹⁶³ See: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2017/09/egypt-ex-kidnapper-admits-get-paid-every-copt-christian-girl-bring/>, last accessed 9 December 2017.

Future outlook

Despite the state of emergency declared by the government to tackle the violent attacks that have targeted Christians, the sense of vulnerability and insecurity that has become pervasive among Christians in Egypt is likely to persist in the foreseeable future. If such attacks by radical Islamic militants continue, the pressure on Christians in Egypt will increase and the ability of the Egyptian Church to cope with this burden will be tested to its limit. The extent to which such attacks will continue or increase will determine the trajectory of the persecution dynamics in Egypt. The non-violent forms of persecution that are prevalent in various spheres of life are likely to continue without much change.

Policy considerations

Taking in to account the above persecution dynamics, Open Doors suggests the following policy recommendations:

- The government and parliament should legislate and enforce laws to prohibit and prevent the unofficial customary-law sessions which often lead to collective punishments for the actions of an individual and unfair decisions since minority rights are not guaranteed in these sessions.
- The international community should urge Egypt to review all legislation restricting freedom of religion or belief, freedom of expression and freedom of assembly, to be compatible with the obligations and principles of ICCPR and other relevant treaties to which Egypt is a signatory.
- Specifically, the review of the Civic Association Law of 15 November 2016 should be reviewed, as in implementation it may give rise to curtailed space for NGOs, a punitive registration system and lack of freedom of association as laid out in ICCPR Article 22.

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18. Vietnam

Reporting period: 1 November 2016 - 31 October 2017

Position on World Watch List (WWL)

WWL 2018 Points: 69 / Position: 18

WWL 2017 Points: 71 / Position: 17

WWL 2016 Points: 66 / Position: 20

The WWL 2018 score for Vietnam (69) is two points lower than in WWL 2017. Although the score for violence dropped by almost four points, there was an increase of pressure registered, reflecting

preparations Christians have been making in order to cope with the new regulations on religion to be implemented on 1 January 2018. Pressure and violence against Christians belonging to the ethnic minorities continued unchanged.

Persecution engines

Persecution engines in Vietnam ¹⁶⁴	
Islamic oppression	Not at all
Religious nationalism	Weak
Ethnic antagonism	Medium
Denominational protectionism	Very Weak
Communist and post-Communist oppression	Very Strong
Secular intolerance	Weak
Dictatorial paranoia	Weak
Organized corruption and crime	Not at all

Communist and post-Communist oppression (Very strong):

Vietnam – or as the official name reads: the “Socialist Republic of Vietnam” – is one of the five remaining countries in the world which is still ruled by a Communist party. Vietnamese Communism is more than just cosmetic as was shown in its latest leadership transition in 2016, countering all hopes for a more reformist approach. The government monitors Christian activity and exercises a high level of pressure on all Christians. The Catholic Church is by far the largest Christian community in the country, but government authorities have a shaky relationship with it as Roman Catholics are tied to a foreign power, the Vatican, and thus often seen as a remnant from French colonial days. Stereotypes such as “Catholics are French and Protestants are American” still prevail, especially in rural areas. In 2017, this statement was even underlined when two Christians were expelled from Vietnam and had to go into exile to France and the United States, respectively. The government is particularly suspicious of the ethnic minorities who live in the central and northern highlands and are known as “Montagnards”. Many of them are Protestant Christians¹⁶⁵ and according to existing reports, the growth of Christianity has continued.

Ethnic antagonism (Medium):

No-one knows the exact figures, but the majority of Christians come from a tribal background and some estimates state that up to 80% of Protestant Christians have an ethnic minority background, many of them being Hmong or Bru. If new Christian believers of a tribal background are discovered by co-villagers or village leaders, they are forced to keep following the age-old norms and values of their community. In order to maintain the tribe’s culture, tribal leaders will often exclude Christians from the community, seeing them as traitors of their culture and identity. The community itself will often react violently against

¹⁶⁴ The scale for the level of influence of Persecution engines and Drivers in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong.

¹⁶⁵ It should be noted that all non-Catholic Christians in Vietnam are Evangelicals and self-identify as such. Many of them are Pentecostal or Charismatic.

new Christian converts as well and expel them from their villages. The authorities cooperate with local tribal leaders to the disadvantage of those converts.

Drivers of persecution

Drivers of persecution in Vietnam	
Government officials at any level from local to national	Very Strong
Ethnic group leaders	Medium
Non-Christian religious leaders at any level from local to national	Very Weak
Christian religious leaders at any level from local to national	Very Weak
Violent religious groups	Not at all
Ideological pressure groups	Not at all
Normal citizens (people from the general public), including mobs	Weak
Own (extended) family	Medium
Political parties at any level from local to national	Very Strong
Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups	Not at all
Organized crime cartels or networks	Not at all
Multilateral organizations (e.g. UN) and embassies	Not at all

The government persecutes the Christian minority at national, regional and local level. The Communist Party often does this by strengthening ideology and by promoting those who hold Communism in esteem. Laws are passed and then implemented (often being misinterpreted) at the grassroots level.

To protect their tribe's culture, ethnic group leaders see converts to Christianity as traitors to their tribal identity and usually cut them off from resources or expel them from their villages altogether, destroying their fields etc. Villagers persecute Christians – also by conniving with local authorities - to give Christians beatings, expel them from their village, or disrupt Christian fellowship by throwing stones at their place of worship. Non-Christian relatives of Christians also act as persecutors by cutting family ties and denying inheritance; in some cases this means forcing a Christian spouse to divorce and withholding rights of child custody.

Context

Vietnam continues to follow its *doi moi* policy (literal translation: renovation), introduced in 1986, and aimed at reforming and improving the economic sector. It delivered good results in doubling the GDP within the last decade as well as in poverty reduction and in increasing employment. Economically, Vietnam is doing well but this policy comes at a price. Many of the Communist leaders, whether in politics or the army, have become rich which has led the country's ideology into a crisis. Communism, especially in the cities, is more a matter of rhetoric than real life, and young people have started to ask questions. However, the authorities act strongly against all who deviate from the norm - especially human rights activists. A growing number of them, many of them Christians, have been harassed, beaten up, detained

and sentenced or expelled, which seems to be a new form of persecution the government is trying out (see under Violence).

One additional challenge is the lasting tension with Vietnam’s big neighbor China. Though it is Communist in name as well and Vietnam’s majority people (Kinh) are basically ethnic Chinese (Viet Nam means literally “Land in the South”, seen from China based in the north), relations have become increasingly tense. The major stumbling block is China’s actions in the South China Sea which is basically being claimed by China exclusively, neglecting all claims other states may have, some of which are backed by international law. China not only attacked Vietnamese vessels in waters it claims for itself, it also started to build structures on reefs and rocks to support its claim. After violent reactions and Vietnam’s deployment of [modern short-range missiles](#)¹⁶⁶ on its islets in the Sea, China and Vietnam came to an [agreement](#)¹⁶⁷ in May 2017 not to increase tensions further. If this means that the relation is warming again, remains to be seen; interestingly, the apparent growing closeness with former archenemy USA has not continued.

A new leadership was chosen in January 2016 during the 12th Party Congress, leaving the most important and influential post of the Secretary-General unchanged. Although Prime Minister Dung, who stood for a more liberal political approach, was widely seen as the most natural candidate, he was effectively sidelined. The leadership called for a [public dialogue on governance](#)¹⁶⁸ in May 2017, but - given the track record the government has with listening to critics - not too much can be expected. Civil rights and freedom of religion remain elusive and it is not yet clear whether the new leadership will look for closer relations with China again or strengthen the more recent ties to the United States. In any case, Christians should not expect any increase in freedom or any real benefit from the [new law on religion](#)¹⁶⁹.

Being Communist, the government acts against all religions, including Buddhists, Cao Daists, Hoa Hao Buddhists and Muslims. This starts with harassment and may end up in detention or expulsion from their homes, villages or – in the WWL 2018 reporting period – even the country. Particularly members of the country’s ethnic minorities are on the authorities’ radar.

Christian communities and how they are affected

Communities of expatriate Christians:

As they cannot mix with local churches, expatriate Christians are involuntarily isolated. This category includes foreign workers from Taiwan, Korea and the Philippines, who face pressure by being monitored.

¹⁶⁶ See: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-southchinasea-vietnam-idUSKCN10K2NE?feedType=RSS&feedName=worldNews>, last accessed 25 November 2016.

¹⁶⁷ See: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-vietnam/china-vietnam-agree-to-keep-south-china-sea-tensions-in-check-idUSKCN18B0HK?feedType=RSS&feedName=worldNews>, last accessed 5 October 2017.

¹⁶⁸ See: <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/vietnam/dialogue-05192017164857.html>, last accessed 5 October 2017.

¹⁶⁹ See: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2017/11/vietnams-religion-policy-practice-contradictions-continue/>, last accessed 28 November 2017.

Historical Christian communities:

These are especially the Roman Catholic Church and the Evangelical Church of Vietnam. Whereas the former managed to open a Catholic university in 2016, problems with land-grabbing by authorities, the arrest of Catholic activists or the expulsion of a Catholic rights activist show that historical Christian communities continue to face severe problems.

Communities of converts to Christianity:

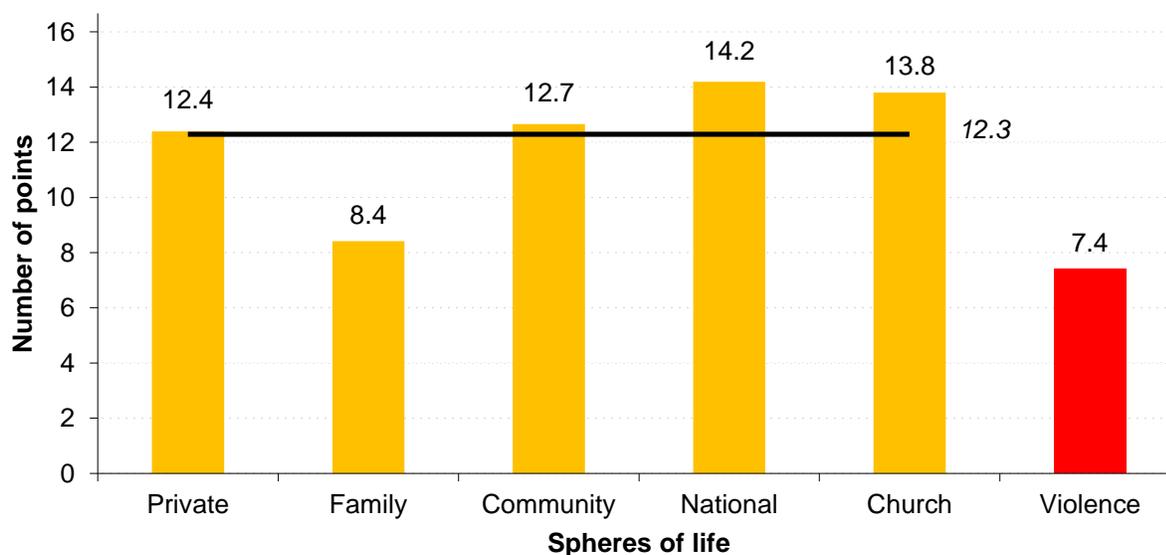
Converts come either from Buddhist or Ethnic-animist background and face the strongest persecution, not only from the authorities, but also from their families, friends and neighbors. As most of them come from ethnic minorities, the Communist authorities are particularly suspicious.

Non-traditional Christian communities:

This category mainly consists of Evangelical and Pentecostal congregations. Baptists, Mennonites, Churches of Christ and many others gather in house-churches. They are closely monitored and are also facing discrimination at various levels of society.

Pressure in the 5 spheres of life and violence

WWL 2018 Persecution Pattern for Vietnam



(The maximum score for each block is 16.7)

The Persecution pattern shows:

- Pressure on Christians in Vietnam increased in almost all spheres of life, causing the average pressure to be at a very high level. It rose from a score of 11.9 in WWL 2017 to 12.3 in WWL 2018.

- Pressure is strongest in the *National sphere* (extreme level), followed by the *Church* and *Community spheres*. Pressure on converts is especially acute in the *Private* and *Family spheres*, but all Christians face a growing pressure in the *National* and *Church spheres*. This pressure is fuelled by a return to Communist rhetoric, the new religion law and a continuing suspicion towards converts as well as to all ethnic and religious minorities.
- Violence against Christians has returned to its more usual level with a score of 7.4. (It rose sharply to 11.1 in WWL 2017 when three Christians were killed.) In the WWL 2018 reporting period, Christians were arrested and forced into exile to France and the United States of America.

Private sphere:

Since families in Vietnam, especially those in rural areas, usually live with three generations under one roof, Christian converts have to be particularly careful about how to practice their faith and to whom to share it with. Christianity is seen as a threat for family members who follow ancestral worship since they fear that nobody would take care of them in the after-life. In some cases, family members evicted converts and ostracized Christian relatives. Converts also have to be cautious when keeping Christian materials. Under these circumstances, meetings with other Christians can become very difficult and in many cases, family members will hinder the new converts from having fellowship with other believers. This is true not only for converts from a Buddhist or animist background but also for believers from families with strong bonds to the Communist Party as well.

Family sphere:

There have been reports that Christians from minority tribes were denied birth certificates and that in other cases government officials forced them to change their surnames into “Ho” (after Revolutionary Communist leader Ho Chi Minh). At least in two cases, Catholic weddings have been hindered by authorities as they “disturbed unity” when displaying Christian symbols in the village. Baptisms in rural areas have to be done in secret if converts are involved, and burials have to be performed according to traditional rites, especially by Christians from the ethnic minorities. Converts who are married may be threatened with divorce and it is common for families to disown, evict and cut off support from family members that convert to Christianity.

There were many reports of Christians asking local officials to certify their documents for education, school and employment. But when the local authorities discovered they were Christian, they refused to certify the documents - especially if in the past the Christians had not obeyed warnings to stop attending Christian meetings.

Christian children are taught Communism at school, and at home Christian families are often put under pressure to join in ancestral worship. But children are not just taught Communism; in the Central Highlands grown-up children of pastors were being put under pressure to make their parents stop preaching and teaching, threatening them with losing their job if unable to convince their parents to cease such ministry.

Community sphere:

Local communities frequently assist in the monitoring of Christian activities. Local authorities encourage the community to restrict Christian groups as these are seen as foreign and dangerous. Online activities are also heavily monitored, as are the phone lines of some church leaders. There are many reports that Christians, especially from the ethnic minorities, are denied government benefits, whether in the form of disaster relief, agricultural micro-finance loans or student grants. In school, pupils are required to show reverence to a photo of Ho Chi Minh. In rural areas they have to participate in tribal practices. Cases have been reported where school principals threatened converts with expulsion. Christian students are frequently told to forget about pursuing an education, because as Christians no one would hire them after their graduation. It is very common that pastors and church leaders are interrogated and called in by police. One pastor said that he could measure summons by the police “by the kilo”.

National sphere:

Vietnam follows its Communist ideology and reveres the state founder Ho Chi Minh, or “Uncle Ho” as he is fondly referred to, but this is not comparable to the reverence shown to leaders in North Korea. All beliefs other than Communist ideology are opposed, and religion is curbed by a law known as Decree 92. While the decree and a related ordinance remained in force throughout 2017, the new comprehensive “Law on Religion and Belief” was adopted by the National Assembly on 18 November 2016 and is scheduled to come into effect on 1 January 2018. Whereas there are a few sections in which the new law could be considered as an improvement for Christians, the regulations on registration in particular will definitely cause churches great difficulties. Overall, not much will change, but it could create a bureaucratic nightmare for churches. The national ID cards (as well as the family records) include a section on religious affiliation. Converts find it hard to have their affiliation changed and, those who have tried, have frequently ended up with the entry “non-religious” or have been denied documents altogether.

Movements of Christian leaders are monitored and access to villages in the northern and central part of Vietnam is restricted. Media reporting on Christians is biased and slander against them is frequent. For example, Christians are portrayed as a tool to reinstate colonial ideology. Perpetrators against Christians are almost never brought to trial, indeed local authorities often hire thugs for acts of violence against Christians. Those Christians who have had to go to court have not received a fair trial. An example of this is the stream of Catholic bloggers being given prison sentences, or the protests caused by the Formosa case where a Taiwanese steel plant caused an environmental disaster and (mainly Catholic) fishermen and activists started protests against the government cover-up. When they tried to get justice, authorities clamped down on them. They have been subjected to smear-campaigns in the local media and accused of disruptive and anti-government activities as well.

Church sphere:

Churches are closely monitored and occasionally meetings are hindered or disturbed. Church registration demands a tremendous amount of administrative work and there is no guarantee of actually getting the permit in the end. This is just one way the government controls the growth of the Church and keeps it under Communist rule. Even churches affiliated to registered churches find it difficult to be recognized by the government and the local authorities. The issue of church building permits is regulated by Decree No.

92 and is handled by the authorities in a highly restrictive way. Land-grabbing by the authorities also continues and especially the Catholic Church faces problems in keeping possession of their property. The Catholic Church owns a variety of large plots of land (churches, schools and hospitals), especially in the larger cities, and there has been more than one clash, when authorities made repeated attempts to take this property away, allegedly for development purposes. The new law requires each church to create a dossier proving that they are registered as an approved Christian group, have the right to gather and that the land is owned by the church. This is then sent to the authorities for approval. It is an extremely lengthy process and the authorities can easily deny permits by claiming that the land is not meant for religious purposes, or the land is residential, or that the church is not a registered group.

There have been reports that youth gatherings were raided. The publication and distribution of Christian materials is possible, but highly restricted. Any illegal material is confiscated by the police. It is also very difficult to obtain permission for setting up courses for training. In addition, every October registered churches have to submit a list of topics of their sermons for the complete coming year. The revised Law on Belief and Religion is not likely to change things substantially, as the overarching goal of the government remains control.

Violence:

The continuing saga of Montagnard Christian refugees, who left Central Vietnamese provinces because of persecution and fled to Cambodia took a new turn in the reporting period. While more than 100 refugees have been repatriated, it was reported in April 2017 that since March 2017, 50 Montagnards [fled from Cambodia to Thailand](#)¹⁷⁰, illustrating how strongly they seek to avoid persecution in Vietnam. And while Catholic journalist and religious activist Dang Xian Dieu was [forced into exile](#)¹⁷¹ to France in February 2017 and Peter Pham Minh Hoang [shared his fate](#)¹⁷² in June 2017, Lutheran pastor Nguyen Cong Chinh was [deported with his family](#)¹⁷³ to the United States in July 2017. This recent trend shows that the Vietnamese maxim mentioned above still holds some truth: “Catholics are from France and Protestants are from the United States.”

Gender profile of persecution

Female/Male: No data available.

¹⁷⁰ See: <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/vietnam/montagnards-04032017130748.html>, last accessed 1 October 2017.

¹⁷¹ See: <http://www.ucanews.com/news/vietnam-forces-journalist-religious-activist-into-exile/78439>, last accessed 1 October 2017.

¹⁷² See: <http://www.ucanews.com/news/vietnam-expels-catholic-activist-to-france/79588>, last accessed 1 October 2017.

¹⁷³ See: <http://www.ucanews.com/news/vietnam-frees-kicks-out-ailing-lutheran-pastor-and-family/79874>, last accessed 1 October 2017.

Future outlook

The economic *doi moi* policy has not spilled over into the social and political spheres of society and is not expected to do so in the foreseeable future. On the contrary, restrictions against dissidents have increased in the WWL 2018 reporting period and dreams of an open civil society in Vietnam with debates on political, economic, social and religious issues (as common in a democratic society) are still far off. Another example of this is a law which was passed in June 2017 giving Vietnamese authorities the right to force lawyers to [report clients](#)¹⁷⁴ known to have committed “crimes against the state”. If one recalls how broad this term is usually interpreted in Communist countries, Christians and other religions may easily come under this law.

Another decision to be watched is how the new “Law on Religion and Belief”, adopted in 2016, is going to be implemented, now that it is coming in force from 1 January 2018 on. Christians and other religions [cannot expect any relief](#)¹⁷⁵ from it, neither do they expect any tangible positive changes. The registration and running of Christian churches will be at least as cumbersome and it is now, and testifying about one’s faith is likely to remain dangerous.

Under the “new” leadership, civil rights and freedom of religion will remain elusive and *Communist oppression* will be heavily felt by Christians for the time being. This pressure may even increase if relations with its big neighbor China are warming up again, especially as the interest of the United States seems to be waning. Unlike China, Vietnam struggles to keep [online dissent in check](#)¹⁷⁶, as the country is among the top ten in having the highest number of Facebook members - a reported 52 million. But it will strive to crackdown heavily on blogs showing deviating thought as shown by the [sentencing](#)¹⁷⁷ of the Catholic blogger known as “Mother Mushroom” to 10 years imprisonment in June 2017. In August 2017, the Vietnamese government [kidnapped](#)¹⁷⁸ former high-ranking Communist Party member and businessman, Trinh Xuan Thanh. He had been working for state-run Petro Vietnam in Germany and was spirited away to Vietnam. This abduction annoyed an important ally, Germany, and showed the growing boldness of Vietnam’s leadership. It was also Vietnam’s warning signal against any form of public dissent.

¹⁷⁴ See: <http://www.ucanews.com/news/revised-vietnamese-law-turns-lawyers-into-informers/79599>, last accessed 1 October 2017.

¹⁷⁵ See: https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/news/?filter_date_from=2016-04-01&filter_date_to=2016-04-30&filter_tag=0&filter_country=56&filter_category=0, last accessed 1 October 2017.

¹⁷⁶ See: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-vietnam-internet/vietnams-facebook-dissidents-test-the-limits-of-communist-state-idUSKCN1B92UQ?feedType=RSS&feedName=worldNews>, last accessed 1 October 2017.

¹⁷⁷ See: <http://www.ucanews.com/news/vietnamese-catholic-blogger-sentenced-to-10-years-in-jail/79638>, last accessed 1 October 2017.

¹⁷⁸ See: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-germany-vietnam-berlin-idUSKBN1AK17Q?feedType=RSS&feedName=worldNews>, last accessed 12 January 2018.

Policy considerations

Currently under review.

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19. Turkmenistan

Reporting period: 1 November 2016 - 31 October 2017

Position on World Watch List (WWL)

WWL 2018 Points: 68 / Position: 19

WWL 2017 Points: 67 / Position: 19

WWL 2016 Points: 66 / Position: 19

With a score of 68 points, Turkmenistan ranks 19th on WWL 2018, rising 1 point in score in comparison to WWL 2017. Christians in Turkmenistan continue to suffer from a high level of control by the authoritarian government – especially in the *Private and Church spheres of life*.

The situation for Christians in Turkmenistan continues to be bad and has even deteriorated a little. The huge pressure from the government continued unabated. This was described accurately in a 3 October 2017 [publication](#)¹⁷⁹ by Forum 18: “The authorities continue to conduct raids on meetings for worship and homes, detain, torture, threaten and fine individuals, and seize religious literature in house searches. In many incidents, male police officers physically assault women trying to exercise their right to freedom of religion or belief.” Christians are not the only target for the Turkmen authorities – other religious groups such as Muslims and Jehovah’s Witnesses are treated similarly.

Persecution engines

Persecution engines ¹⁸⁰ in Turkmenistan	
Islamic oppression	Strong
Religious nationalism	Not at all
Ethnic antagonism	Not at all
Denominational protectionism	Not at all
Communist and post-Communist oppression	Not at all
Secular intolerance	Not at all
Dictatorial paranoia	Very Strong
Organized corruption and crime	Very Weak

¹⁷⁹ See: http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2320, last accessed 12 December 2017.

¹⁸⁰ The scale for the level of influence of Persecution engines and Drivers in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong.

Dictatorial paranoia (Very strong):

No religious activities beyond state-run and state-controlled institutions are allowed. Mainstream Protestants are frequently branded “extremists” due to their religious activities outside state-sanctioned structures. Members of Protestant churches are often regarded as followers of an alien sect that has only one goal, namely to spy on and destroy the current political system. From this perspective they need to be not only controlled, but if necessary, even eradicated.

Islamic oppression (Strong):

If indigenous citizens (who are Muslim) convert to Christianity, they are likely to experience pressure and occasionally physical violence from their families, friends and local community to force them to return to their former faith. Some converts are locked up by their families for long periods, beaten and may eventually be expelled from their communities. Local mullahs preach against them, so adding pressure. As a result, converts will do their best to hide their faith – they become so-called secret believers.

Drivers of persecution

Drivers of persecution in Turkmenistan	
Government officials at any level from local to national	Very Strong
Ethnic group leaders	Medium
Non-Christian religious leaders at any level from local to national	Medium
Christian religious leaders at any level from local to national	Not at all
Violent religious groups	Not at all
Ideological pressure groups	Not at all
Normal citizens (people from the general public), including mobs	Medium
Own (extended) family	Very Strong
Political parties at any level from local to national	Strong
Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups	Not at all
Organized crime cartels or networks	Very Weak
Multilateral organizations (e.g. UN) and embassies	Not at all

Government officials and *Political parties* are the drivers that can be linked directly with the Persecution engine *Dictatorial paranoia*. They form the oppression that comes from the authorities. The *Extended family*, *Ethnic group leaders*, *non-Christian religious leaders* and *Normal citizens* are the drivers that can be connected to the oppression of the Islamic environment especially on Christians with a Muslim background. These drivers are linked with the persecution engine *Islamic oppression*.

Context

Turkmenistan is a quickly developing country, mostly due to the discovery of large amounts of oil and gas. However, this is a two-sided coin. On the one hand, it allows huge investments of money which is highlighted in reports of plans to make the capital, Ashgabat, a “marble city”. The flipside of this

opportunity is that the country becomes increasingly dependent on the export of oil and gas and – given the high level of secrecy and corruption – that it will only benefit a small group of people. The enormous dip in the price of oil in the WWL 2018 reporting period seriously affected Turkmenistan.

Turkmen are living in many countries, ranging from Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Iran, northern Pakistan, Syria, and Iraq to the North Caucasus (Stavropol Krai). There are contacts between these groups. Sunni Muslims from Turkmenistan have become involved in the struggle of Islamic militants in the Middle East (viz. Islamic State) and the Indian subcontinent (viz. al-Qaeda). The government in Ashgabat fears the impact of the jihadists returning to Turkmenistan and therefore monitors all religious activities closely.

The country is considered to be one of the most restrictive places in the world. There is no freedom of information or press. It is made extremely difficult for foreigners to access the country. A new personality cult has been started around President Berdymukhammedov. Additionally, there is a high level of monitoring of each and every group in society (including Christians) as well as highly restricted access to foreign media and resources. Consequently, it is also difficult to get information out of the country. On 12 April 2016 a new law on religion was introduced, restricting Christian church life more harshly.¹⁸¹

Christians are not the only religious group that is persecuted in Turkmenistan. Muslims, Jehovah's Witnesses and indeed all religious groups are treated in a similar fashion.

Christian communities and how they are affected

Communities of expatriate Christians:

These were not counted as a separate category in the WWL analysis.

Historical Christian communities:

The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) has accustomed itself to the limitations provided by the government and is therefore left more or less undisturbed. Sunday services may be monitored, but they are conducted unhindered and members can meet. Printing or importing Christian materials is restricted.

Communities of converts to Christianity:

Christian converts from a Muslim background bear the brunt of persecution in Turkmenistan. Apart from the state, they are also under strong pressure from family, friends and community. And for them the latter is by far the more powerful because it dominates their everyday life.

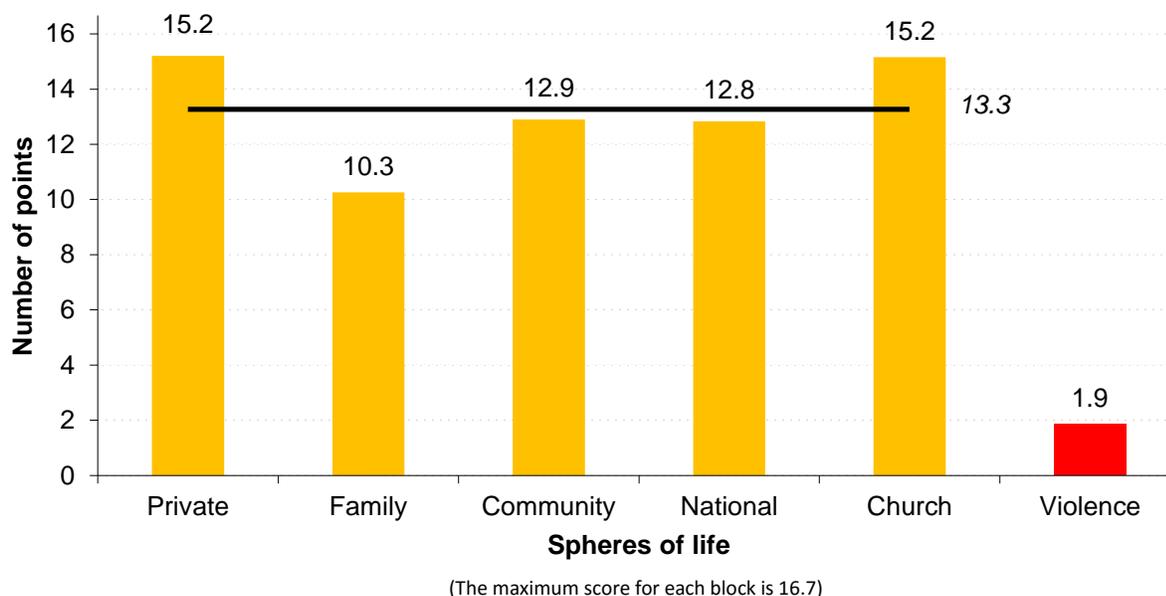
Non-traditional Christian communities:

¹⁸¹ See: World Watch Monitor, 18 May 2017: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2017/05/turkmenistans-secret-additions-already-restrictive-religion-law/>.

After converts, this category of Christians are the second most persecuted group, especially when the churches have not been registered. Baptist, Evangelical and Pentecostal groups suffer from raids, threats, arrests, and fines.

Pressure in the 5 spheres of life and violence

WWL 2018 Persecution Pattern for Turkmenistan



The Persecution pattern for Turkmenistan shows:

- Taking into consideration all *Spheres of life*, the average pressure on Christians in Turkmenistan is 13.3, an increase of 0.2 in comparison to WWL 2017.
- Pressure is extreme with 15.2 points both in the *Private sphere* (especially affecting converts from Islam) and *Church sphere*. This can be linked directly with the two Persecution engines that are present in Uzbekistan: *Islamic oppression* and *Dictatorial paranoia*.
- The score for violence is 1.9 points, a rise of 0.8 points in comparison to WWL 2017. One reason for the rise was the expulsion of a pastor and his family from the country.

Private sphere:

Conversion is the issue that triggers the fiercest reaction from the social and cultural environment. It is regarded as an affront to the honor of the family. Conversion is also high on the radar of the state and its agents. Not only converts are under pressure for conversion, but also those Christians active in evangelism. The government pays for information about Christian worship in homes. There have been reports of Christians being forced to recant their faith in public. All public media (including Internet access) are under state control – Christians can access them, but not use them to disseminate their message. The state has also banned the use of satellite dishes. It is very risky for a convert to talk about his new faith with members

of the family or with non-Christian guests. The level of surveillance on religion in Turkmenistan is huge, and even private meetings between Christians are regularly monitored.

Family sphere:

A citizen's religion is not recorded in official documents such as passports and ID cards. But local authorities, often run by Muslims from the neighborhood, may obstruct wedding, birth and burial registrations. In Turkmenabad and Mary local Islamic leaders declared that no Christians with a Muslim background could be buried at the cemetery. Baptisms of converts can also cause social tensions. Schools are known to arrange anti-Christian lessons together with local Muslim leaders, and all students must attend Islamic holiday celebrations. Children of Christians are usually isolated from having fellowship with other children. They are often humiliated in front of all the other children in their class. When someone who is married converts, family, friends and community will put pressure on the spouse to divorce. Converts in particular risk losing their inheritance.

Community sphere:

Christians are reported to have been victims of threats, harassment, sexual attacks, imprisonment, secret police raids, fines and arbitrary detention. Turkmenistan has one of the most closed regimes in the former Soviet Union region and relies on repressive control. The country's Christians are constantly under surveillance by different state organizations, including secret police. Female converts in conservative Islamic regions run the risk of being kidnapped and married off to a Muslim. Many Christians are ridiculed and excluded from higher education, and active Christians run a high risk of being fired from their job. Homes were the targets of raids where Christians were fined for holding religious meetings even when that was not the case. When meetings are raided in Turkmenistan - and this happens even to registered groups - all those present will be interrogated, many will be detained, many will be fined, and all materials found will be confiscated.

National sphere:

Although freedom of religion is protected by the constitution, Turkmenistan is among the biggest violators of religious freedom in the world. Christians in the country reported cases of imprisonment, detention, threats and verbal insults, beatings, confiscation and sexual assault. All activities by religious groups are under strict scrutiny. Over the past couple of years known Christians have been stopped at the airport when they were trying to go abroad. Many Christian groups cannot get registered, and even registered ones are under constant pressure and their members face risk of persecution on a day to day basis. The media are state-controlled; they refer to Christian churches as "sects" and constantly distort the facts when reporting about Christian activities. Christians suffer from biased treatment against them in court. International monitoring of court cases is not permitted, let alone for those of accused Christians.

Church sphere:

The 2003 religion law forbids worship in private homes and bans religious activities by unregistered organizations. The government has obstructed the registration of new churches. Hardly any permits are issued and some congregations have been attempting to register for more than a decade. Church services

continue to be raided and disrupted at times. Youth-work is prohibited. The publication of Christian religious materials in Turkmenistan is strictly forbidden by law. Importing such materials is only allowed for some registered groups like the ROC under strict scrutiny by the government. Openly selling Christian materials is forbidden. Materials are routinely confiscated during raids on churches and houses of Christians. The state does not allow Christian charitable, humanitarian, medical, social or cultural organizations, institutions, or schools etc. to exist. Since the authorities are the biggest persecutor it is extremely dangerous (and futile) to speak out against them.

Violence:

Violent incidents are rarely reported. This is because Christians in Turkmenistan do not dare to share this kind of information with foreigners (out of fear that the information might be traced back to them). An estimated 5 Christians were briefly detained by the police and 20 Christians received beatings. 10 houses were damaged during searches by the police. A pastor and his family were forced to leave the country.

Gender profile of persecution

Female:

In Turkmenistan the daily life of indigenous people is based on Islamic culture which puts women in an inferior position compared to men. Total submission is expected from women to their parents and if married - to their husbands. This makes them more vulnerable to persecution - both as Christians and as women who challenge the existing order. Female converts from Islam are particularly affected by the obligation to follow any pre-marital arrangements made by her parents prior to her conversion. A female convert may experience abduction, home imprisonment, beating, forced marriage and rape. Other female Christians (i.e. without a Muslim background) may experience verbal abuse, threats and loss of employment.

Male:

Church leaders are normally men; they are also normally the heads of their family and the main bread winners. When a Christian man becomes a target of persecution - fined or imprisoned - his whole family will suffer. Losing jobs will affect the whole family. If a man is a church leader his persecution will affect his church and cause fear. The absence of an alternative option for military service is one of the problematic areas for males. For the following it is mainly Christian men and boys from a Muslim background who are affected: They may suffer from verbal and physical abuse, threats, beatings, detention, interrogation, confiscation, fines, imprisonment, job loss, discrimination, excommunication, home detention, shaming, excommunication, divorce, loss of possessions.

Future outlook

After Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan is the most repressive Central Asian state in its treatment of religious minorities. Given the increased nationalism and the “spiritual guidance” the new president is supposed to be giving the country (like his predecessor Niyazov did with his Rukhnama teachings), the pressure on Christians will most likely remain unchanged at a relatively high level but with thankfully low levels of violence. The pressure from the social environment (mostly on converts from Islam) will remain stable.

Policy considerations

Open Doors suggests the following recommendations be made:

- The government of Turkmenistan has so far rejected the recommendation of the UN Human Rights Council (CCPR/C/TKM/CO/1, para. 17), and should now act upon the UN Human Rights Committee’s list of issues for consideration of July 2016 (point 21 and 22 specifically) in the framework of ICCPR articles 2, 18 and 26.
- The focus on Freedom of Religion or Belief issues of the UN Human Rights Council is to be welcomed. However, the government authorities in Turkmenistan need to pay additional attention to the rights of Muslim background Christian women who are being forced to re-convert and marry Muslims, and on sexual attacks used as a form of persecution of Christians.
- The UN Human Rights Committee should cooperate with the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) to ensure that recommendations are made for the government of Turkmenistan to take ownership of developing rights-based policies for tackling violent extremism, terrorism and dealing with returning jihadists.
- The government of Turkmenistan has ignored OSCE recommendations on Freedom of Religion or Belief in the creation of the new Constitution in September 2016. The international community and OSCE should continue to cooperate with the government of Turkmenistan to convert commitments into legal policy-making and implementation.

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20. Laos

Reporting period: 1 November 2016 - 31 October 2017

Position on World Watch List (WWL)

WWL 2018 Points: 67 / Position: 20

WWL 2017 Points: 64 / Position: 24

WWL 2016 Points: 58 / Position: 29

The WWL 2018 score for Laos showed an increase of three points. Compared to WWL 2017, the scores for Laos increased in all *Spheres of life*, particularly in the *Private, Family and Community spheres of life*. This reflects an increased pressure on converts from family, friends, neighbors and the local authorities. The rise is also partly due to more reports being available concerning Christians among the country's ethnic minorities. The score for violence decreased very slightly; persecution has never been very violent in Laos.

Persecution engines

Persecution engines in Laos ¹⁸²	
Islamic oppression	Not at all
Religious nationalism	Medium
Ethnic antagonism	Strong
Denominational protectionism	Medium
Communist and post-Communist oppression	Very strong
Secular intolerance	Not at all
Dictatorial paranoia	Very strong
Organized corruption and crime	Not at all

Communist and post-Communist oppression (Very strong):

Laos is one of the five remaining Marxist-Leninist countries in the world, staunchly sticks to it and as such is strictly opposed to any influence deemed foreign or Western. In order to keep control, the Communist Party puts enormous pressure on society, including the small Christian minority. It has a negative view of Christians and considers them to be foreign agents and enemies. Christianity is seen as a Western ideology that challenges Communism. The Lao government controls all information, including newspapers and radio, effectively maintaining a tight control in the country.

¹⁸² The scale for the level of influence of Persecution engines and Drivers in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong.

Dictatorial paranoia (Very strong):

The government is secretive and no one outside the inner circle of leaders seems to know exactly what is going on. Christians must take extreme caution when talking about their faith. They always have to stay within tacitly understood guidelines and there are limits not to be crossed if Christians want to avoid negative reactions from officials. Local authorities often make use of society’s hostile attitude towards Christians to justify monitoring them.

Ethnic antagonism (Strong):

Animism and other tribal practices are observed in tribal villages, especially in rural areas (which make up at least sixty percent of the country’s territory). Abandoning tribal practices for Christian faith is seen as betrayal. Village leaders and family members see it necessary to expel Christians from their communities because of their fear that this foreign faith will anger the guardian spirits. Local officials are also known to force Christians to renounce their faith and village leaders sometimes summon the local authorities to arrest Christians.

Religious nationalism (Medium):

Laos is one of the five countries following Theravada Buddhism (the oldest Buddhist tradition) and the Buddhist faith is deeply rooted in society. There is a widely shared conviction that Laos and Buddhism are inextricably linked together and that Buddhism should always take the supreme position in the country. The goal of local Buddhist leaders to keep their country “pure” and the goal of the Communist political leaders to keep control complement each other well. Both want to dominate society and prevent deviations from the norm.

Denominational protectionism (Medium):

The Laos Evangelical Church is the dominant church group in the country and until recently, has blocked the entry of other denominations. As other denominations poured in, especially Protestant ones, the government uses the LEC to gather information and sometimes to keep those denominations in check.

Drivers of persecution

Drivers of persecution in Laos	
Government officials at any level from local to national	Very Strong
Ethnic group leaders	Strong
Non-Christian religious leaders at any level from local to national	Strong
Christian religious leaders at any level from local to national	Medium
Violent religious groups	Not at all
Ideological pressure groups	Not at all
Normal citizens (people from the general public), including mobs	Strong
Own (extended) family	Strong
Political parties at any level from local to national	Very Strong
Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups	Not at all

Organized crime cartels or networks	Not at all
Multilateral organizations (e.g. UN) and embassies	Not at all

Christians are regularly persecuted by the Communist government authorities - most often at the provincial level - and by local members of the Communist Party. There are occasions where the authorities cooperate with local religious leaders (mostly Buddhist monks) in order to put pressure on Christians, especially converts. Converts to Christianity experience persecution in their own family on a very frequent basis. There have also been efforts to monitor the activities of house-churches with the help of certain registered churches. Normal citizens, especially in rural areas, watch Christians with suspicion and sometimes even drive them out of their villages.

Context

Laos has been in the tight grip of the Lao People’s Revolutionary Party since 1975. Its exclusive networks of party members’ families and close friends add to the pressure felt strongly by every citizen, but especially by minorities. The country lacks freedom of opinion, let alone a free press which could highlight the manifold cases of corruption. Any organized group, particularly if not in line with the ideology imposed by the government, is perceived as a threat to the preservation of Communism in the country. One of the latest signs of repression was when authorities [sentenced three Lao nationals](#)¹⁸³ to prison terms of up to 18 years in May 2017, after they had held a protest in front of the Lao embassy in Thailand.

The country’s dependency on its giant neighbor China, especially as a land-locked country, hampers development and makes Laos vulnerable. China is by far the largest foreign investor in the country. However, growing environmental and social costs led authorities to intervene in the WWL 2018 reporting period, for example by [shutting down banana farms](#)¹⁸⁴ producing for China in seven provinces. Laotian girls continue to be [trafficked](#)¹⁸⁵ to China due to a lack of female spouses there.

There were no reports available on the persecution of other religions. However, Decree 315, implemented by the Laotian government (see “National sphere”), will have consequences for other religious groups like Buddhists or animists, and not just Christians.

¹⁸³ See: <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Three-Laotian-workers-sentenced-to-12,-18-and-20-years-jail-for-criticizing-government-40758.html>, last accessed 5 September 2017.

¹⁸⁴ See: <http://thediplomat.com/2017/04/whats-behind-the-china-banana-ban-in-laos/>, last accessed 5 September 2017.

¹⁸⁵ See: <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/laos/chinese-marriage-proposals-02132017122352.html>, last accessed 5 September 2017.

Christian communities and how they are affected

Communities of expatriate Christians:

Such communities do not mix with local churches, they include communities of diplomatic staff and are facing pressure, for example, through the police monitoring system.

Historical Christian communities:

These are communities such as the Roman Catholic Church, Lao Evangelical Church (LEC) and the Seventh Day Adventists: Whereas these churches are officially recognized by the authorities, they are monitored and in case of the LEC face restrictions in choosing their own leaders and printing Christian materials. The government partly forces them to monitor non-registered churches.

Communities of converts to Christianity:

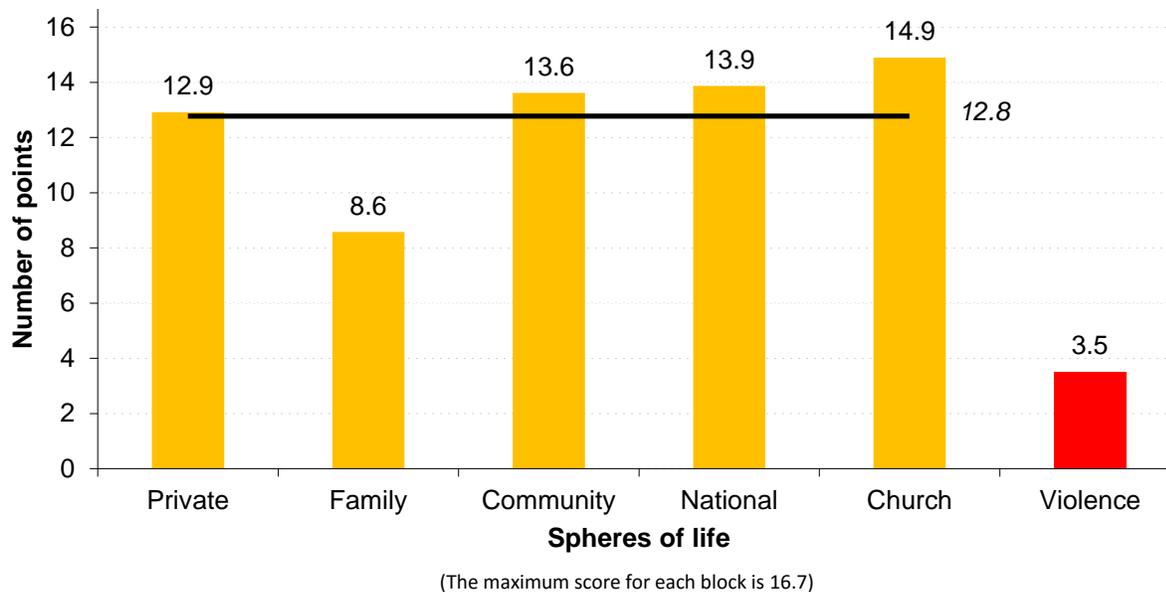
Converts come from a Buddhist or Ethnic-animist background and are facing the strongest persecution both from local authorities and from families, friends and neighbors. Since every conversion is an indication that Christianity is growing, the government is wary of conversions as well.

Non-traditional Christian communities:

Evangelical, Baptist and Pentecostal congregations, Methodists, Lutherans, Assemblies of God and many other denominations exist in Laos. As the government does not allow “illegal” gatherings, all these groups need to register under one of the three government-recognized churches mentioned above. Congregations that do not, have to meet clandestinely. Members of those churches also face discrimination at various levels of society.

Pressure in the 5 spheres of life and violence

WWL 2018 Persecution Pattern for Laos



The Persecution pattern shows:

- The average pressure on Christians over all *Spheres of life* is at a very high level, rising from a score of 12.1 in WWL 2017 to 12.8 in WWL 2018.
- Pressure is strongest in the *Church, National and Community spheres*. Pressure on converts is especially acute in the *Private and Community spheres*, while all Christians face growing pressure in the *National and Church spheres*. This pressure is a result of the authorities re-emphasizing Communist values and trying to keep the number of conversions down. It also reflects the government's effort to stay in power and fight all forces perceived as alien.
- The increase in pressure corresponded with a slight growth in the level of violence against Christians: The violence score increased from 3.1 (in WWL 2017) to 3.5 in WWL 2018.

Private sphere:

Converts always have to be very careful how they worship, especially if they are the only believers in their family. In remote places, houses only have one room (and in many places three generations are living under one roof) which makes it very difficult to find a place to read the Bible, pray or worship undisturbed and unnoticed. Converts experience physical and verbal abuse and can be expelled from their homes. As all gatherings are seen as dangerous by the authorities, every meeting needs to be approved by local officials, who effectively hinder meetings or declare them illegal. Most villages are led by a village chief (*pho ban* or *nai ban*) and one or two assistants who are elected by the villagers to oversee all activities in their village and maintain peace. District and province officials sometimes use their positions and threaten

Christians with expulsion from their villages for Christian activities including worship, prayer and Bible reading. Many Lao believe they are protected by *phi* (spirits). The fear of offending the spirits often turns family members against Christians. They often hinder Christian relatives from meeting with other Christians or even leaving the house. Bibles and other Christian materials have to be hidden carefully and can only be read with much caution. All Christians are closely monitored, and at times, the help of registered churches is used for keeping an eye on the Christians.

Family sphere:

Family records are sometimes confiscated from Christians which make the registration of all family events (births, weddings, deaths) impossible. In strongly Buddhist areas, weddings and burials have been hindered (in one instance a body was even taken away by the authorities), and baptisms have had to be carried out with the utmost caution. Buddhist teachings are often considered part of Lao “cultural education” and are therefore part of the curriculum in school. In one reported case, Christian students were required to attend an actual Buddhist temple ritual which was against their Christian faith. Children of Christian families have even been denied admittance at some schools because of their faith. Two common things families use to put pressure on converts is the threat of divorce (if married) and the loss of inheritance rights.

Community sphere:

Provinces like Luang Namtha in the north and Savannakhet in the south have traditionally been hard places for Christians since the local authorities in these provinces still seem very determined to wipe out any Christian witness. They continue to harass, arrest and evict Christians from their homes. Christianity is seen as Western, a dangerous divergence from Communist ideology and hence a threat to the nation. Local communities frequently assist in the monitoring of Christian activities. Family members, villagers, and local authorities regularly threaten or even beat Christians in an attempt to make them renounce their faith. The community expects Christians to take part in Buddhist and animistic ceremonies. The *baci* ceremony is a communal event to invoke the spirits and expresses goodwill, good luck, and good health to those being honored. The ceremony is meant to invoke spirits to return home, secure them in place, and re-establish equilibrium. A white thread tied around the wrist is supposed to ensure protection from spirits. Christians prefer to stay away from such ceremonies that involve the spirit world. Their refusal to participate in the rituals often causes friction in the village.

Christians are seen as divergent to the norm. Families that were expelled from villages said they had neighbors that wanted to convert but were hesitant since they saw Christianity to be disadvantageous to their lives in the community. Communist leaders also fear the spread of Christianity and refer to it as a Western ideology which weakens the nation. This negative view towards Christians leads to delays in assistance, threats and restrictions from both the community and local authorities. Christians often face limitations in the use of community resources. In one case, a pregnant Christian woman was denied access to a hospital to give birth. In the WWL 2018 reporting period, there have been cases of Christians being denied employment for faith reasons and Christian business owners have been discriminated against. Local authorities also fine Christians for illegal meetings. In one case, nine Christian families, a total of 38 people, were fined 800,000 kip (\$100 USD) by their village authorities. They had the choice of paying the

fine or renouncing their faith, with the threat of unbearable pressure if they refused. Apart from such fines, the authorities have also been known to put pressure on families to sacrifice a pig to appease the spirits.

National sphere:

Article 9 of the 2003 amended Constitution states the duty of the State to respect and protect all religion, particularly mentioning Buddhists and monks, while Article 43 says that Lao citizens have the right and freedom to believe or not to believe in any religion. However, since the promulgation of Decree 92 in 2002, those broad provisions on religious practices have been abused to make the true exercise of religious freedom more difficult. This Decree demands the government's prior consent for any religious activity: Without this consent any activity is considered illegal. Conversion to a new faith, preaching, and conducting church activities all require government permission. Based on the experience of Christian leaders, the government hardly ever gives permission.

In August 2016, Prime Minister Thongloun Sisoulith issued a new regulation: Decree 315 on the Management and Protection of Religious Activities. Decree 315 defines the Government's role as the final arbiter of permissible religious activities. Decree 315 replaces Decree 92 on religious practice. The government issued an update in the WWL 2018 reporting period which will bring even more restrictions and trouble for Christians. As a direct result of this update, Christians in Luang Prabang Province have received more pressure from police to stop holding meetings. The new law requires a registered place of worship that is owned by the church and a registered minister in order to be considered legal. However, this is almost impossible to accomplish. First, nobody is keen to sell land to a church. Secondly, the new law states that the construction of churches needs to be approved by the prime minister.

Christianity is seen as an insult to the Buddhist faith which is embraced as being a central part of Lao culture and therefore of the nation's identity. But Christians are also accused by village leaders of angering spirits whenever there is widespread sickness in their village. They are frequently accused of unethical conversion and in the WWL 2018 reporting period, some were even detained for that reason. If perpetrators attack Christians or churches, they nearly always go unpunished. Christians cannot expect to receive fair treatment and justice from the police, authorities or courts. The media continues to present Christianity as a remnant of the colonial days and a source of anger for the spirits.

Church sphere:

The pressure on church life is extremely high. All activities in churches are closely monitored. The government also intimidates and threatens church leaders suspected of proselytizing. The government is slightly more tolerant of religious practices in urban areas but has often acted severely in rural areas. Local officials and police often interfered with the right to worship in a number of places and are aware of all groups that meet for worship. They raided churches and confiscated Bibles and other Christian literature. Believers were also threatened with jail sentences if they did not recant their faith. The LEC churches at times try to monitor the activities of house-churches for the authorities. The government will act on any statements which are against Communist ideology. Churches need to submit detailed reports in order to get permission from local authorities to meet and worship. Communities often hinder churches from

setting up and building places of worship. At times, the community uses force to stop church construction. Tremendous administrative requirements must be fulfilled before a church can be built. This is especially true for the northern provinces. In some rural areas, a local officer is even required to attend worship in order to monitor the Christians. All Christian materials published (or imported legally) need to be approved by both the government and the LEC church. Local officials accompanied by the police have been known to confiscate Bibles and other Christian material from house-churches. Since the passing of the NGO Law in 2014, the government has increasingly controlled the charitable activities of Christian ministries in the country.

Violence:

There have been several cases where Christians were expelled from their communities in the WWL 2018 reporting period. Reports that there have been churches of the Hmong minority destroyed could not be confirmed and were therefore not considered in the scoring. One house of a Christian believer was targeted by an arson attack in January 2017. At least two Laotian Christians were detained for several days by the police in Xaisomboun Province in March 2017. There were also reports of more Hmong Christians being detained and arrested.

Gender profile of persecution

Female/ Male: No data available.

Future outlook

Laos rotated out of the international limelight when it ended its chairmanship of the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) at the end of 2016. This does not mean, however, that the challenges the country faces will get smaller anytime soon. The main challenge for the country remains its relationship with its giant neighbor China.

No initiatives will be tolerated which cannot be controlled by the Communist authorities and this will remain true for the Christian minority well into the future and reflects the unbroken power of Lao's main persecution engine of *Communist and post-Communist oppression*. The authorities continue to come down very harshly on any perceived dissent and deviation (which includes Christian faith). On the other hand, Laos desperately needs development and economic growth. Therefore it may find itself in a catch-22 situation in the foreseeable future: Foreign investment needs increasing openness, otherwise the dependence on China will grow further.

Policy considerations

Currently under review.

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21. Jordan

Reporting period: 1 November 2016 - 31 October 2017

Position on World Watch List (WWL)

WWL 2018 Points: 66 / Position: 21

WWL 2017 Points: 63 / Position: 27

WWL 2016 Points: 59 / Position: 27

With a score of 66 points, Jordan ranks 21 , a 3 point rise from the WWL 2017 level. A higher number of reported violent incidents is the main reason for the increase in total points for Jordan. Violent incidents occurred mostly against Christians with a Muslim background, but other Christians active in evangelism were also affected.

Persecution engines

Persecution engines in Jordan ¹⁸⁶	
Islamic oppression	Strong
Religious nationalism	Not at all
Ethnic antagonism	Strong
Denominational protectionism	Weak
Communist and post-Communist oppression	Not at all
Secular intolerance	Not at all
Dictatorial paranoia	Very Weak
Organized corruption and crime	Weak

Islamic oppression (Strong):

Islamic oppression is one of the main Persecution engines in Jordan, but works mostly through non-violent actions. The government imposes more Islamic values and law on society although they still promote tolerance and the peaceful coexistence of other religions. In terms of personal life, converts from Islam to Christianity face the highest persecution. Their families and community may ostracism them, or even commit some violence against them. All types of Christians in Jordan can be subject to government monitoring, or even Sharia law if he or she is married to a Muslim or is in a court dispute with a Muslim.

¹⁸⁶ The scale for the level of influence of Persecution engines and Drivers in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong.

Overall, Christians are given the illusion of freedom, but in reality the Islamic traditions embedded in society do put restrictions on Christian life in Jordan. Islamic oppression also works through violent actions carried out by Islamic militants. Oppression by radical Muslims is much more severe than that by the government as described above. More and more Jordanians are being radicalized by the Islamic State group (IS) ideology, which puts Christians at greater risk.

Ethnic antagonism (Strong):

This persecution engine describes how the continuing influence of age-old norms and values shaped in a tribal context are enforced. *Ethnic antagonism* can come in the form of traditional religion and in the case of Jordan this is clearly mixed with Islam and especially affects Christians with a Muslim background. Jordan's society is basically tribal - especially outside the major cities - and is embedded in Jordanian nationalism. After the mass exodus of Palestinians into Jordan after the 1967 war with Israel, Jordan became divided into pure Jordanian 'East Bankers' (originating from the region east of the Jordan river) and Palestinian / Jordanian 'West Bankers' (who have their roots west of the Jordan river). Tribalism has made this ethnic division more apparent and acts as a socioeconomic safety net. Family, clan and tribal connections allowed and continue to allow easterners to successfully navigate government, economic and social spheres, naturally including employment but also including political and social standing. Because of this social advantage for 'pure' Jordanians, tribalism has become even more integrated within the Jordanian concept of nationalism. Thus, Christians coming from a Palestinian background may not have as many advantages as a pure Jordanian Christian. The latter issue needs more research and was not included in WWL analysis. However the situation of converts from Islam was included.

Drivers of persecution

Drivers of persecution in Jordan	
Government officials at any level from local to national	Strong
Ethnic group leaders	Strong
Non-Christian religious leaders at any level from local to national	Medium
Christian religious leaders at any level from local to national	Medium
Violent religious groups	Medium
Ideological pressure groups	Not at all
Normal citizens (people from the general public), including mobs	Weak
Own (extended) family	Strong
Political parties at any level from local to national	Very Weak
Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups	Not at all
Organized crime cartels or networks	Not at all
Multilateral organizations (e.g. UN) and embassies	Very Weak

In general, the Christian community praises Jordan's royal family for fostering a spirit of tolerance and peaceful coexistence. However, Christians do face restrictions and monitoring from the government to keep informed about any proselytizing of Muslims or Christian preaching and rhetoric that would threaten

social or political stability. Converts from Islam to Christianity experience most persecution. Government officials were reported to put pressure on converts to return to Islam and, in some cases, they had been initially informed by the convert's family. Most pressure comes from the family, which can even lead to serious violence and killing. Tribalism is strong in Jordan and ethnic group leaders are also likely to influence converts to renounce their new faith. The same is true for Islamic leaders, who consider converts to still be Muslims.

Fanatical Islamic movements are certainly a source of persecution for Christians – and also for Jordanians of other religious faith, including Muslims. Although the level of persecution is not as high as in neighboring countries such as Syria, Iraq, or Egypt, IS has been trying to penetrate Jordan, but with little success so far. However, the first time IS claimed responsibility for an attack on Jordanian soil was on 18 December 2016, when 10 people were killed in an attack on Karak Castle, a popular tourist destination.

In Jordan, some Christian denominations are recognized while others are not – official recognition coming solely from the government. However, some established Christian churches oppose official recognition being extended to newer evangelical groups and lobbies the government to prevent such recognition from taking place.

Context

Jordanian society is multi-ethnic - a phenomenon which is also reflected in the monarch's family. Late King Hussein's roots are in Saudi Arabia, his second wife and mother of current King Abdullah II is British. King Abdullah himself is married to a Palestinian. The majority of the population consists of Palestinians, most of whom fled after the Arab-Israeli wars of 1948 and 1967. The majority of them received citizenship in the early 1950s. Palestinian Jordanians ("Westbankers") are not treated equally compared to most other nationals who are from Bedouin descent ("Eastbankers") and have been living in the area for centuries. In general, the latter are loyal to the king. Jordan hosts large groups of refugees, mostly from Iraq and Syria. As of December 2016, the UNHCR¹⁸⁷ estimates there are 655,314 refugees from Syria and 60,647 from Iraq in the country. As such, Jordan hosts the second highest number of refugees per 1,000 inhabitants in the world. Due to the presence of many different nationalities in the kingdom, there is confusion about what a Jordanian citizen's national identity actually is. Also, the high number of refugees leads to economic, political and religious pressure and is a potential destabilizing factor.

The total number of Christians has been declining since the country's independence in 1946. This decline was mainly due to lower birth rates and high emigration rates. A large number of Muslim refugees have also entered the country from Syria and Iraq. Combined with the rising fears of radical Islam and the current dire economic conditions, this puts increasing pressure on Christians, especially on Evangelicals

¹⁸⁷ See: <http://www.refworld.org/country,,UNHCR,,JOR,,5851864b4,0.html>, last accessed 20 December 2016.

and converts from Islam. As a result, many Christian communities keep to themselves and do not engage in outreach.

For a long time, Jordan was one of the most liberal countries in the region in terms of freedom of religion. However, the tide seems to be turning now for Christians. Although Christians belonging to historical churches still enjoy a relatively high degree of religious freedom, Christians with a Muslim background are experiencing the repercussions of increased radical influences in society. Also Christians active in evangelism or in ministry involving converts from Islam are suffering increasing pressure and monitoring.

Other religions facing limitations in Jordan, are Shiites, Druze and Bahai. Reportedly, for a Sunni to convert to Shiite Islam is even harder than converting to Christianity. The Bahai religion is not officially recognized, but adherents are allowed to practice their religion. Marriage certificates of Bahais are also not recognized by the Department of Civil Status and Passports. Finally, Druze experience social exclusion and live in specific areas. Like the Bahai religion, the Druze faith is also not officially recognized by the Jordanian government.

Christian communities and how they are affected

Communities of expatriate Christians:

Expatriate Christians are present in Jordan, but not as a group involuntarily isolated from other categories of Christian communities. This category is therefore not included in WWL analysis.

Historical Christian communities:

This category makes up the largest group of Christians in Jordan, most of whom belong to the Orthodox and Roman Catholic denominations. Overall, they enjoy a relatively high level of religious freedom but can experience discrimination, e.g. in the area of employment.

Communities of converts to Christianity:

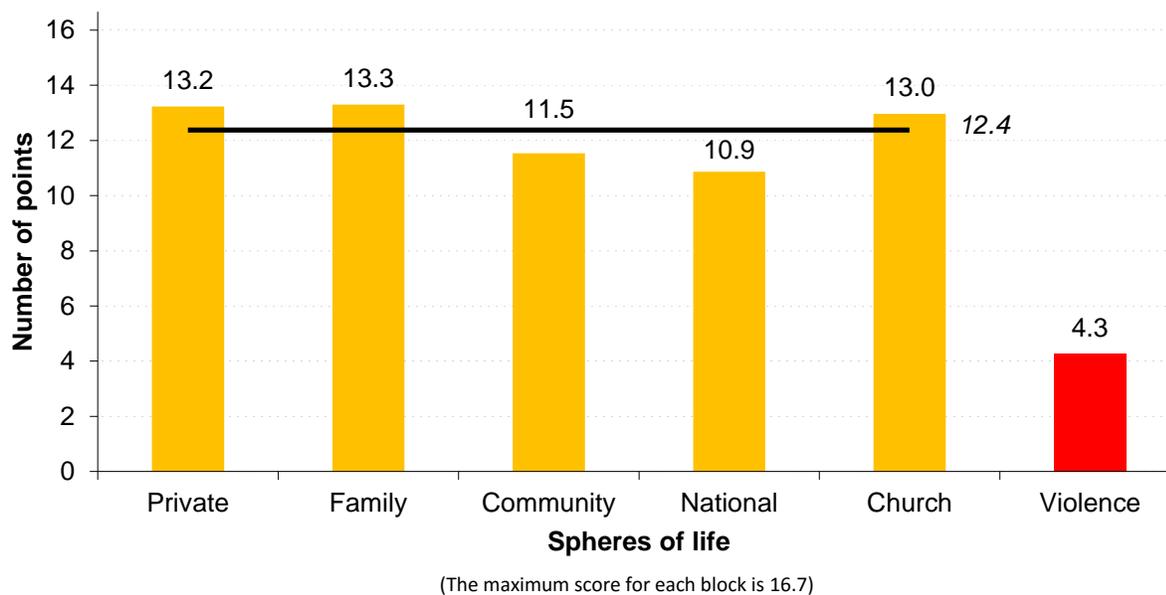
Of all Christians in Jordan, those with a Muslim background are persecuted the most for their faith. If their new faith is known, they can face oppression from a whole variety of sources, namely government officials, ethnic group leaders, non-Christian religious leaders, violent religious groups, ordinary people and (extended) family. The situation for converts – whose small numbers have been growing - has worsened during the past few years, mostly due to pressure from their families and to the increasing activity of radical Islamic groups.

Non-traditional Christian communities:

After converts, Christians from Evangelical, Baptist and Pentecostal congregations face most opposition, especially from the side of government officials. Evangelical churches are not recognized by the Jordanian government. In some cases, the government can be regarded as a driver of persecution, since violence against Christians is met with impunity.

Pressure in the 5 spheres of life and violence

WWL 2018 Persecution Pattern for Jordan



The persecution pattern for Jordan shows:

- Overall, the pressure on Christians in Jordan – mainly on converts from Islam - is at a very high level and the average score (12.4) increased very slightly from the WWL 2017 level of 12.3. This increase was mostly due to adjustments based on the availability of more information.
- Pressure is strongest and at a very high scores in the *Private, Church, and Family spheres of life*. This is typical for a situation in which *Islamic oppression* is the main persecution engine combined with *Ethnic antagonism*.
- Pressure from *Islamic oppression* in the *private, family and community spheres* especially affects converts from Islam. Family, local authorities and non-Christian leaders are important drivers of persecution here.
- The score for violence rose from 1.5 in WWL 2017 to 4.3. Violent incidents occurred mostly against converts, although Christians active in evangelism were also affected. A higher number of reported violent incidents is the main reason for the increase in total points for Jordan.
- The overall pressure in Jordan is characterized by serious oppression of Christians with a Muslim background and a relatively free situation for the other types of Christianity as long as they do not cross the line of evangelizing Muslims and being active in ministry involving converts from Islam.

Private sphere:

In the area of private worship, it is especially converts from Islam who are affected, since they cannot openly practice their faith. Giving any indication to those around them that they may be Christians can have serious consequences. All other types of Christianity have more freedom to privately practice their faith, as long as they do not evangelize Muslims.

Family sphere:

Especially Christians with a Muslim background experience pressure from the side of their families which can even result in serious violence and death. To put pressure on converts, families are known to inform the authorities which is likely to result in arrest. Converts are also likely to lose custody of their children as a result of their conversion. The state, however, does not play an active role in this.

Community sphere:

Also in this *sphere of life*, it is especially Christians with a Muslim background who are under pressure, if their new faith is known. However other types of Christianity can experience pressure in this area as well, for instance through discrimination in public and private employment where they can meet glass ceilings (in public service) and be disadvantaged in promotions. Especially Christians active in the support of converts (which includes giving practical guidance, counselling and biblical education) can face threats and obstruction in daily life and also monitoring by their local community.

National sphere:

Here all types of Christianity can face pressure, though converts are especially targeted. Islam is the religion of the state and the Jordanian constitution gives primacy to Sharia law. Issues concerning personal or family status are under religious courts. Muslims are under Sharia courts and there are also religious courts for historical Christian communities such as the Orthodox, Catholics and Anglicans. In cases where one party is Muslim and the other non-Muslim, the case is handled under Sharia court. Sharia courts do not recognize the conversion of a Muslim to Christianity and still consider them Muslims, even apostates. The state also regards children (under 18 years old) whose father has converted to Islam as Muslims. On issues of inheritance, Islamic law applies to all citizens irrespective of their faith and Christians cannot inherit from a Muslim family. Conversion from Islam is not officially recognized and the public evangelization of Muslims is against government policy. Muslims who become Christians still fall under the jurisdiction of Sharia courts, which means their marriages can be annulled; they can lose custody of their children, will lose inheritance rights and can be deprived of other civil rights as well. Security service personnel have reportedly questioned converts on their beliefs, threatened court and other actions, and promised rewards for returning to Islam, such as job opportunities. The authorities have also reportedly withheld certificates of good behavior needed for job applications or for opening a business and have told employers to dismiss converts. Those harming a Christian from a Muslim background have de-facto impunity.

Church sphere:

Converts face most pressure in the *church sphere of life*, while all other types of Christianity, especially non-traditional denominations, experience certain limitations. Any open or legal form of church life for converts is impossible. Compared to other countries in the region however, church life in general is less

restricted - especially for Christians belonging to historical churches - because of the existence of a number of recognized churches. Evangelical churches face problems in obtaining registration. Building permits for church buildings are hard to get and all sorts of other subtle discrimination occur. Reportedly, the activities of Evangelical churches and underground churches (where converts gather) are being monitored by the secret police. Christian materials cannot be openly distributed and are only allowed to be sold at recognized locations.

Violence:

- There were three incidents of either church attacks or church closures and on 6 January 2017 vandals broke into a cemetery church and broke a statue of the Virgin Mary. In general acts of vandalism against churches are uncommon in Jordan.
- There were several cases of attacks on houses of converts and other Christians during the WWL2018 reporting period.
- A small number of Christians with a Muslim background was reportedly arrested for reasons directly or indirectly related to their faith.
- Some converts reported that they were physically abused or suffered death threats from family members.
- A number of Christians with a Muslim background were forced to leave their homes and go into hiding - or seek another place of residence either inside or outside the country. Also, several foreign missionaries were forced to leave the country because of their Christian activities.

Gender profile of persecution

Female:

In Jordan, of all categories of Christian communities, female converts from Islam are particularly vulnerable to persecution for their faith. However, other Christian females also face inequality, e.g. if their husbands convert to Islam. In the case of female converts, pressure comes most often from the side of the family. When she still lives with her family, a convert risks house arrest and even sexual harassment or rape if her faith is revealed. Though forced marriages are not uncommon in Jordan, female converts are under additional threat to be married off involuntarily in an effort to prevent shame and bring her back on 'the right path'.

Female converts cannot officially marry male Christians. Even if they marry abroad, the state does not recognize the marriage. Christian women in general can only marry Muslim men if they convert to Islam, as determined by the religious registration system. This is particularly complicated for Christian women who are not converts desiring to marry converts, as their husbands-to-be are still considered Muslims. When married to non-Christian husbands, female converts risks abuse and death threats which cause some to flee. They are also faced with travel restrictions. Travel bans can be imposed by the authorities but also by family, for instance to prevent the female convert from leaving the country. If this ban is violated, a court case can be started for "travelling without permission". Female converts are also under the threat of forced divorce. The attitude of the spouse's family is crucial in this issue.

According to the International Religious Freedom Report for 2016¹⁸⁸: “Any member of society may file an apostasy complaint against such individuals [*apostates*]. In cases decided by a sharia court, judges can annul converts’ marriages, transfer child custody to a nonparent Muslim family member or declare the children ‘wards of the state’, and convey an individual’s property rights to Muslim family members.” If a Muslim husband and non-Muslim wife are divorced, the wife automatically loses custody of the children when they reach seven years of age, unlike Muslim women¹⁸⁹. If a divorced Christian converts to Islam, she can gain custody rights over the children and receive an inheritance from her husband. This puts a lot of pressure on divorced Christian women to convert. In short, raising a stable family is very hard for converts and for Christian women whose husbands convert to Islam.

Male:

Job discrimination affects all categories of Christian communities, especially those working in the public sector. In the mostly traditional and tribal Jordanian society where men are regarded as “the primary breadwinners for their families”¹⁹⁰, this can have a considerable effect on Christian families.

Under Sharia law, marriages between Muslim women and a non-Muslim men are not allowed. For the marriage to be legal, the man must convert to Islam. This makes legal marriage between Christian men who are not converts and Christian women with a Muslim background impossible. Sharia law also determines that if a Christian wife converts to Islam, her husband must convert as well for their marriage to remain legal.

Finally, if the pressure on Christian families leads to emigration, this has a potentially negative effect on future leadership, since the Orthodox and Catholic churches will then have less men available for training and taking on leadership roles.

Future outlook

According to the Economist Intelligence Unit, King Abdullah II is expected to remain in power for the next few years, promoting “modest political reform and modernization”, but he “will not relinquish key powers and opposition activity will continue, albeit with Islamist parties engaged within the system.”¹⁹¹ The king wants to modernize society step by step and is trying to implement measures that are beneficial to religious minorities including Christians. During 2017, he has reiterated that he desires to “protect the existence and identity of Arab Christians”. Measures or proposals to promote equality between Muslims and Christians, like the adjustment of schoolbooks, are however dividing the kingdom and have met a lot

¹⁸⁸ See: <https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm#wrapper> accessed 10 September 2017.

¹⁸⁹ See: <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/12/jordan-law-christians-convert-muslims-women-divorce.html#ixzz4sLuorUwD>, last accessed 11 September 2017.

¹⁹⁰ See: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/302581523_Attitudes_towards_Gender_Roles_in_Jordan accessed 11 September 2017.

¹⁹¹ See: <http://country.eiu.com/jordan> last accessed 13 September 2017.

of resistance, especially from conservative Muslims, including the Muslim Brotherhood's Islamic Action Front (IAF).

The IAF gained an unexpected victory in the municipal elections of August 2017, despite a low turnout and an election law which decreases the influence of votes from larger cities where Islamists and Jordanians of Palestinian descent have a strong presence. Election gains like these can stimulate the persecution engine *Islamic oppression* by indirectly putting increasing pressure on Christians and others with views not in line with radical Islam.

The persecution engine *Ethnic antagonism* does not currently seem to be facing any big change. According to an Arab Youth Survey¹⁹² however, Jordanian youth are becoming more influenced by their peers and the media than by patriarchal or religious authority. As a result, the government is trying to deter and preempt the influence of radical Islamic groups. If this loosening of contact between youth and family or religious leaders continues, it could weaken *Ethnic antagonism* in the long run.

Policy considerations

- The EU (in its role of spearheading international support for refugees in Jordan through European Neighborhood funding and the Madad Trust) should ensure that support is specifically given to ensure Jordan maintains civil society participation, interfaith dialogue and co-existence between religious groups and freedom of religion, belief and conversion.
- The EU (through the Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief outside Europe, Jan Figel) should closely monitor and report on religious pressures in Jordan occurring as society changes through the influx of large numbers of refugees and the influence of radical Islamic groups. Recommendations from this reporting should then be implemented in the programs for humanitarian assistance and education, ensuring that all citizens and refugees of any religious group are treated equally.
- Both the Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief outside Europe, Jan Figel, and the EU External Action Service (EEAS) should press the Jordanian state to ensure the protection of all religious converts of Muslim background, including Christian converts, and call for the implementation of the Freedom of Religion or Belief measures introduced under King Abdullah II in an educational system that respects all religions and beliefs.
- The international community should support Jordan in integrating Freedom of Religion or Belief as a key concern into security policies aimed at countering religiously motivated radicalism and terrorism.
- The government of Jordan and the international community should protect the diverse religious and ethnic Jordanian society and the freedoms they enjoy, as the influence of radical Islamic organizations grows in the country.

¹⁹² See: <http://www.arabyouthsurvey.com/findings.html>, last accessed 30 September 2017.

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22. Tajikistan

Reporting period: 1 November 2016 - 31 October 2017

Position on World Watch List (WWL)

WWL 2018 Points: 65 / Position: 22

WWL 2017 Points: 58 / Position: 35

WWL 2016 Points: 58 / Position: 31

With a score of 65 points, Tajikistan ranks 22 on WWL 2018, an increase of 7 points compared to WWL 2017. Pressure is very high in all *Spheres of life* and the violence score increased by 2,4 points from a low to high score level. The Tajik government under President Emomali Rahmon has tightened religious freedom in legislation and has increased the level of surveillance of religious communities. The number of violent incidents (e.g. police raids, confiscation of religious materials, detentions, interrogations and physical violence) increased. The decision not to include isolated communities of expatriate Christians as a separate category in the WWL analysis gives a better representation of the country situation, but also contributed to the rise in score.

Persecution engines

Persecution engines ¹⁹³ in Tajikistan	
Islamic oppression	Strong
Religious nationalism	Not at all
Ethnic antagonism	Not at all
Denominational protectionism	Not at all
Communist and post-Communist oppression	Not at all
Secular intolerance	Not at all
Dictatorial paranoia	Very Strong
Organized corruption and crime	Very Weak

Dictatorial paranoia (Very strong):

No religious activities beyond state-run and state-controlled institutions are allowed. Pressure from the authorities has been stepped up since 2015; there have been more raids on meetings, and believers have

¹⁹³ The scale for the level of influence of Persecution engines and Drivers in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong.

been interrogated. It is very common that members of any Protestant church are regarded as followers of an alien sect with only one goal, namely to spy on and destroy the current political system. From this perspective they need to be not only controlled, but if necessary, even eradicated. Another area of crackdown involves religious education, no matter what religion is concerned.

Islamic oppression (Strong):

If indigenous citizens (who are Muslim) convert to Christianity, they are likely to experience pressure and occasionally physical violence from their families, friends and local community to force them to return to their former faith. Some converts are locked up by their families for long periods, beaten and may eventually be expelled from their communities. Local mullahs preach against them, so adding pressure. As a result, converts will do their best to hide their faith – they become so-called secret believers.

Drivers of persecution

Drivers of persecution in Tajikistan	
Government officials at any level from local to national	Very Strong
Ethnic group leaders	Very Weak
Non-Christian religious leaders at any level from local to national	Medium
Christian religious leaders at any level from local to national	Not at all
Violent religious groups	Very Weak
Ideological pressure groups	Not at all
Normal citizens (people from the general public), including mobs	Medium
Own (extended) family	Very Strong
Political parties at any level from local to national	Strong
Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups	Not at all
Organized crime cartels or networks	Very Weak
Multilateral organizations (e.g. UN) and embassies	Not at all

Government officials and *Political parties* are the drivers that can be linked directly with the persecution engine *Dictatorial paranoia*. They form the oppression that comes from the authorities. The *Extended family*, *non-Christian religious leaders* and *Normal citizens* are the drivers that can be connected to the oppression of the Islamic environment especially on converts to Christianity. These drivers are linked with the persecution engine *Islamic oppression*.

Context

Tajikistan is the only Central Asian country with a Persian national language; culturally Tajikistan has more affinity with Iran and Afghanistan than the other countries in Central Asia. Tajikistan is one of the poorest countries in the region and relies heavily on remittances – an estimated 20% of the whole population work in Russia and Kazakhstan. On the positive side, these remittances ensure that about 60% of the population

can cover their daily needs; on the negative side, there is a high social cost as families are torn apart and children are growing up with few male relatives.

Tajikistan shares a 1,200-kilometer (750-mile) frontier with Afghanistan. This has several repercussions: a) there is a huge flow of drugs from Afghanistan via Tajikistan to the West; b) Tajiks (also living in Afghanistan) are involved in Islamic fighting; c) What happens across the border has great impact on Tajikistan. Now that most Western troops have withdrawn from Afghanistan, Tajikistan has sought help from Russia. They have offered the use of military bases in exchange for border control by Russian soldiers.

On 1 March 2015 parliamentary elections were held in Tajikistan. Until then Tajikistan was the only country in the region that had a recognized political opposition party – a religiously based one: the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT). Soon after the elections, which were as expected won by the supporters of President Emomali Rahmon, a distinct shift occurred in the country. Within a few months the IRPT was banned. More and more restrictive legislation was imposed - including on matters of religion. Tajikistan can now be considered to be much more in line with the other dictatorial regimes in Central Asia.

Christians are not the only believers persecuted by the government. Muslims, Jews, Jehovah's Witnesses all experience similar pressure. All religious activities are under surveillance.

Christian communities and how they are affected

Communities of expatriate Christians:

Expatriate Christians in Tajikistan form isolated groups and are not classed as a separate category for WWL analysis.

Historical Christian communities:

These groups, the largest of which is the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), are not involved in evangelism among Tajiks. They can function pretty normally as the Tajik regime does not consider them a threat. What is more, the Tajik government has no interest in provoking Russia by attacking the ROC.

Communities of converts to Christianity:

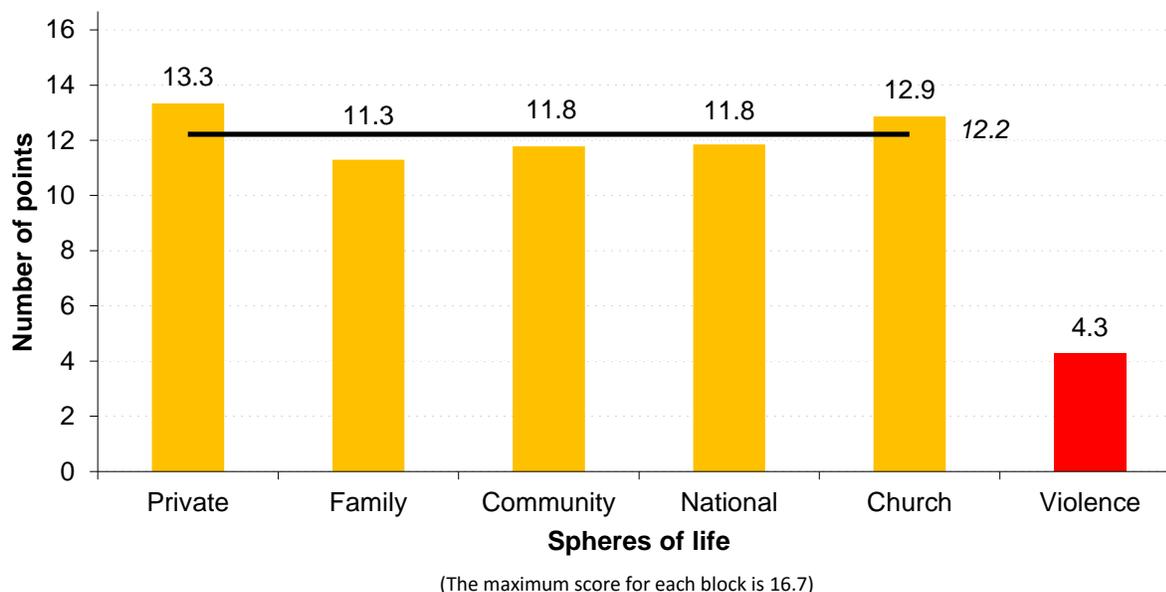
Christian converts with a Muslim background bear the brunt of persecution in Tajikistan. Apart from limited restrictions from the state, they are also under strong pressure from family, friends and community. And for them the latter is by far the more powerful. Conversion is seen as ethnic, national, and religious betrayal and brings shame upon the family.

Non-traditional Christian communities:

After converts, this category of Christians is the second most persecuted group (mainly due to active evangelism). Baptist, Evangelical and Pentecostal groups suffer from many raids, threats, arrests, and fines by the authorities.

Pressure in the 5 spheres of life and violence

WWL 2018 Persecution Pattern for Tajikistan



The Persecution pattern for Tajikistan shows:

- Taking all *Spheres of life* into consideration, the average pressure on Christians in Tajikistan is 12.2, rising from 11.2 in WWL 2017.
- Pressure is highest in the *Private sphere* (especially for Christians with a Muslim background) with 13.3 points and in the *Church sphere* with 12.9 points. This can be linked directly with the two Persecution engines that are present in Tajikistan: *Islamic oppression* and *Dictatorial paranoia*.
- The score for violence is 4.3 points rising from the low level of 1.9 in WWL 2017. The number of incidents of beatings and police raids etc. increased markedly.

Private sphere:

There is no legal obstacle to conversion, but punishment for conversion is unavoidable, especially from family members. Conducting acts of Christian worship privately is very risky for converts from Islam and converts are known to have suffered beatings and forced renunciations of faith. Converts usually hide Christian literature and symbols because of possible reprisals within the family, but other Christians must also be careful as owning such literature and displaying Christian symbols can be regarded as a form of evangelism. Converts have to be very careful when accessing Christian radio, television or websites that they are not discovered by their family, friends and community. It is also very risky for converts to talk

about their new faith with members of the family and others because the family will do its utmost (sometimes in the form of house arrest) to have converts return to their former faith.

Family sphere:

A person's religious affiliation is not registered in official documents, but occasionally local authorities (run by Muslims from the local community) may obstruct the registration of births, weddings or deaths of converts. Celebrations of a convert's wedding or baptism will also be opposed by family and local community. Since August 2011 any religious activity for persons under the age of 18 has become strictly forbidden. All Christian youth work must now be done in secret and there have been raids on summer camps for children. Children and teens are not allowed to visit Sunday school or receive religious training. Islamic topics are part of the school curriculum and all children are required to attend them. Children of Christians are often humiliated at schools in front of all the other children. Some wives or husbands of converts have been forced to separate because of threats. Christians with a Muslim background may also lose inheritance rights.

Community sphere:

At the community level, converts and Protestants are monitored constantly: Converts experience high levels of pressure (in the form of threats and harassment) to give up their new faith. Protestants need to be very careful in evangelism or they may face violence. Marriages are usually arranged by the parents and female converts run the risk of being kidnapped and married off to a Muslim. For all converts there is pressure to take part in Islamic ceremonies and feasts. At the community level children of converts face problems in education. They are often ridiculed by their teachers and fellow pupils. Known Christians will have far fewer career opportunities, and employment at offices of the local authorities is impossible. Local communities and authorities will also hinder known Christians (and most certainly a convert) from running their own businesses. Paying bribes or protection money is quite common in Tajikistan, but this is not specifically aimed at Christians. Local police regularly interrogate Christians.

National sphere:

The state declares itself to be secular. The Constitution protects religious freedom, but in practice the government enforces policies which restrict religious freedom. Some local and regional leaders create administrative barriers for Christians which can affect the registration of churches. There is no alternative for military service and those refusing end up in prison. A law introduced in July 2012 prohibits Tajik citizens from going abroad in order to receive religious education, to teach or to establish ties with foreign religious organizations. Protestants are barred from working for the government as they are seen as an untrustworthy foreign influence that threatens the Tajik community. Since March 2015 there has been a crackdown on all non-government organizations. Activities related to church ministry, including youth work and the publication of religious materials, have been curtailed and censored by the government. State agents and community members can harass, detain and interrogate Christians with impunity. Christians suffer from biased treatment against them in court cases.

Church sphere:

All Christian activity is monitored. Only registered groups are legally entitled to exist, own a building, hold meetings or own religious materials. Getting registration is extremely difficult and without it a group is illegal and will be raided by police. The August 2011 laws prohibit any youth work. Since youth form about 50% of all believers, this has major consequences. The Council for Religious Affairs must approve sermons as well as religious materials. The religious training of leaders can only be done by registered groups (and these are few). Sometimes, unregistered groups do this under the umbrella of the registered ones. All media are state-controlled and thus inaccessible for Christian input. Internet access is only possible via state providers. The government does not allow Christians to establish their own schools, organizations or institutions, nor do they allow Christian charitable, humanitarian, medical, social or cultural associations. All foreign contacts with domestic religious groups are prohibited as part of the government's crackdown on radical religious activity.

Violence:

At least 3 churches and two schools related to Christian groups were raided by the authorities in the WWL 2018 reporting period. There were doubtless more such incidents - underreporting remains a problem. 4 Christians were briefly detained by the police for distributing literature. Pastor Kholmatov was sentenced to three years' imprisonment in July 2017. An estimated 20 Christians were beaten. Two Christian convert women went into hiding from their Muslim husbands and relatives. One Christian went into hiding from the police, but no Christians were forced to leave Tajikistan.

Examples:

- In February 2017 the authorities began a series of raids on congregations belonging to the Sunmin Sunbogym (Good News of Grace) Protestant Church in the northern Sogd region, confiscating Christian songbooks and other literature. On 10 April 2017 the secret police arrested Pastor Bakhrom Kholmatov of the Sunmin Sunbogym congregation in the regional capital Khujand. He remains in secret police custody, apparently under investigation on criminal charges of "extremism". (Source: [Forum 18](#)¹⁹⁴)
- This year (2017), officials in Dushanbe have closed down two nursery schools. One was closed after officials found a Christian songbook, the other apparently because Protestants were employed there. (Source: [Forum 18](#)¹⁹⁵)
- On 20 July 2017 [Forum 18](#)¹⁹⁶ reported that Pastor Bakhrom Kholmatov of Khujand's Sunmin Sunbogym (Full Gospel) Protestant Church had been jailed for three years. The 42-year-old prisoner of conscience Kholmatov, who is married with three children, was first held in NSC secret police custody after his 10 April arrest. While on trial he was held in a police detention centre, and he has since been moved to an unknown prison.

¹⁹⁴ See: http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2276.

¹⁹⁵ See link above.

¹⁹⁶ See: http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2298.

Gender profile of persecution

Female:

In Tajikistan the daily life of indigenous people is based on Islamic culture which puts women in an inferior position compared to men. Total submission is expected from women to their parents and if married - to their husbands. This makes them more vulnerable to persecution - both as Christians and as women who challenge the existing order. The state authorities in Tajikistan prohibit the use of religious clothes or symbols, also by female believers. In the case of Islamic women, the hijab is also prohibited. Among some Baptists and Pentecostal groups married women traditionally cover their head with a headscarf. This headscarf is different to the one used by Muslim women, but potentially, it could also become a case for arrest. No cases have yet been reported, however.

Male:

Church leaders are normally men, and men are also normally the head of their family and the main bread winner. When a Christian man becomes a target of persecution (e.g. fined or imprisoned), his whole family will suffer. Losing jobs and income will affect the whole family. If a man is a church leader his persecution will affect his church and cause fear. Persecution from the state includes raids, searches, detention, interrogation, confiscation, fines and imprisonment. When detained by police, Christian men suffer verbal and physical abuse, threats, beatings, and pressure to become an informer. At the hands of the local community, Christian men can lose their jobs and suffer beatings, threats, verbal and physical abuse, discrimination, ostracization, and pressure on the family members. At the hands of his own family, a Christian with a Muslim background may face beatings, threats, home detention, verbal and physical abuse, humiliation, excommunication and divorce.

Future outlook

The government puts heavy pressure on all “deviating” groups, including Christians. By tightening already existing laws and by enforcing them strictly, the government is putting additional pressure on the Christian minority. The youth law in particular has left Christians (and other affected religious minorities) in legal limbo as it is not obvious what is allowed and what is denied by law. The regime has recently become much more like other repressive Central Asian governments – therefore, the situation for Christians is expected to worsen in the future. The pressure from the social environment (mostly on converts from Islam) will remain stable.

Policy considerations

Open Doors recommends that the government of Tajikistan be encouraged to honor all its OSCE commitments to Freedom of Religion or Belief through full implementation in all legislation and practice. This includes:

- Cooperating fully with the OSCE and international community to develop a human rights-based approach to countering violent extremism and terrorism, in line with its commitment to interfaith, interreligious and intercultural dialogue and to counter manifestations of intolerance and discrimination on the basis of religion or belief. (Ministerial Declaration on Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism and Radicalization that lead to Terrorism, Belgrade 2015).
- A full revision of the 2009 Religion Law, with full public consultation and parliamentary debate, removing articles requiring state permission for all exercise of Freedom of Religion or Belief.
- The removal of all articles providing for sanctions and punishment for religious teaching, education and activity from the Administrative Code (July 2012), and revision of the language to remove all ambiguities concerning Freedom of Religion or Belief.
- Full revision of the youth law which leaves Christians and other affected religious minorities in legal limbo due to the ambiguities in what is allowed or denied by law.
- Legal provisions and monitoring to ensure that all citizens receive a fair trial and legal representation in court cases (with no exemption of or discrimination against religious minorities).

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23. Malaysia

Reporting period: 1 November 2016 - 31 October 2017

Position on World Watch List (WWL)

WWL 2018 Points: 65 / Position: 23

WWL 2017 Points: 60 / Position: 31

WWL 2016 Points: 58 / Position: 30

The WWL 2018 score for Malaysia is 5 points higher than in WWL 2017, well in keeping with a worsening trend which has been observed over several years. Pressure on Christians rose in all *Spheres of life*, as government, political parties and Islamic pressure groups have increased their efforts to sideline the Christian minority, deepening the already existing rift between East and West Malaysia. The fact that three Christian workers went missing without any trace, one being abducted in broad daylight, has increased the insecurity of Christians and almost doubled the score for violence.

Persecution engines

Persecution engines in Malaysia ¹⁹⁷	
Islamic oppression	Strong
Religious nationalism	Not at all
Ethnic antagonism	Not at all
Denominational protectionism	Not at all
Communist and post-Communist oppression	Not at all
Secular intolerance	Not at all
Dictatorial paranoia	Strong
Organized corruption and crime	Not at all

Islamic oppression (Strong):

Malaysia carries the image of probably being the world's best role model for a liberal and tolerant Islamic country. However, this image has been fading over the last years, a trend confirmed in the WWL 2018 reporting period. One example of this can be seen in the government's continued effort¹⁹⁸ to introduce Sharia penal law (*hudud*) in the federal state of Kelantan. According to the Constitution, Sharia law is not on an equal footing with civil law, but in practice this regulation is not in force anymore. This can especially be seen in cases of divorce and custody: Civil courts frequently decide in favor of the child's non-Muslim mother, which is why fathers sometimes convert to Islam since, if they claim custody before Sharia courts, it will be granted to them. The police prefers to implement the latter's decisions as this means less trouble. This raises the legal question of the rule of law in Malaysia, even though there have been efforts to solve those problems by instituting a committee to work on solutions. In August 2017 the government decided to [withdraw a clause](#)¹⁹⁹ in the new Marriage and Divorce Law which would have done away with the unilateral conversion of children. Deleted Article 88 (A) had said that even if a spouse converts to Islam, a child's conversion should be bilateral (i.e. depend on both parents' consent) and be subject to the child's wishes when it turns 18.

The ban on using the standard vocabulary "Allah" for God in Bahasa Malay, implemented against a Catholic newspaper, which was sanctioned by the High Court in January 2015, is being followed by more court cases, e.g. in the state of Sabah. In December 2015, the Malacca campus of the Technical University Mara held a Muslim-only "anti-Christianization" seminar, leading to a public outcry. Islamic radicalism and conservatism are on the rise as was shown in June 2016 when eight people were injured in an attack inspired by IS in Selangor, and – in the WWL 2018 reporting period - in the abductions of two Christian pastors, whose whereabouts remain unknown (see under "Violence" below).

¹⁹⁷ The scale for the level of influence of Persecution engines and Drivers in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong.

¹⁹⁸ At the time of writing (September 2017) Sharia penal law is still not law in Kelantan yet.

¹⁹⁹ See: <http://www.themalaymailonline.com/malaysia/article/putrajaya-withdraws-bill-banning-unilateral-child-conversions#BelUIkCpEG45PPQb.97>, last accessed 6 September 2017.

Dictatorial paranoia (Strong):

While *Dictatorial paranoia* is certainly only a subsidiary persecution engine in Malaysia, it is still relevant for understanding the country's situation. The ruling coalition (United Malays National Organization, referred to as UMNO) has governed the country since independence in 1957. It is comprised of a Muslim party in alliance with smaller Chinese and Indian parties and for years had never had to face opposition parties. So the impact of the earthquake-like elections in 2008 and 2013 cannot be overestimated: For the first time concrete opposition appeared and now even governs some federal states. This led to panic reactions by the government. It re-emphasized its policy of preferential treatment to Malay people instead of following a policy of equality. The UMNO increasingly plays religious and racial cards to stay in power, a strategy which has the potential to backfire, but in any case affects the Christian minority seriously as the UMNO may decide to join forces with the radical Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS), which used to be part of the opposition pact, but decided to leave it in May 2017. Elections, which have to take place by summer 2018 at the latest, are likely to add fuel to this persecution engine.

Drivers of persecution

Drivers of persecution in Malaysia	
Government officials at any level from local to national	Very Strong
Ethnic group leaders	Strong
Non-Christian religious leaders at any level from local to national	Strong
Christian religious leaders at any level from local to national	Not at all
Violent religious groups	Medium
Ideological pressure groups	Not at all
Normal citizens (people from the general public), including mobs	Medium
Own (extended) family	Very Strong
Political parties at any level from local to national	Strong
Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups	Not at all
Organized crime cartels or networks	Not at all
Multilateral organizations (e.g. UN) and embassies	Not at all

The Constitution prohibits Malays from converting to other religions and limits propagating non-Muslim religions. Government officials hence strive for maintaining and if possible increasing Islamic standards, to the detriment of non-Muslim minorities. Various Muslim NGOs see themselves as “champions of Islam” and have the support of the government. At times they stir up racial disharmony and religious discrimination with their statements and actions. Political parties like the ruling UMNO and PAS uphold and protect Islam. It was the PAS, for example, who proposed the introduction of Hudud Law in Kelantan. PAS leader Hadi Awang has been [quoted](#)²⁰⁰ in January 2016 as claiming that Christians are converting Muslims using money. In this way, discord and hatred against Christians is being sown. UMNO and PAS are

²⁰⁰ See: <http://www.asiaone.com/malaysia/pas-president-under-fire-over-christian-missionaries-remark>, last accessed 5 October 2017.

using religion to rally support from the Malays. For the converts, family members are the strongest drivers of persecution.

Context

Malaysian society is increasingly divided between an ethnic Malay majority (which is clearly favored by the government) and the Chinese and Indian minorities (as well as the indigenous tribal population living mainly in the eastern part of Malaysia) which are discriminated against. Racism is an everyday experience for ethnic minorities in Malaysia. In recent years, the government has increasingly played the racist and religious card to stay in power and to rally support from the ethnic Malay majority, which makes up around 60% of the population. Criticism from the opposition has been (mis-)represented as threatening the Malay dominance or even as a plot to oust Islam from Malaysia. Christians are particularly affected by this tension since most Christians either belong to indigenous tribal groups or are of Chinese or Indian origin.

Pastor Raymond Koh was [abducted in broad daylight](#)²⁰¹ on 13 February 2017, when his car was stopped in Petaling Jaya by three black SUVs and he was taken away to an unknown place. This sent shockwaves through the whole Christian and minority community, especially after it emerged that another pastor couple, Joshua and Ruth Hilmy, has already gone missing in November 2016. The fact that the police have still made [no tangible progress](#)²⁰² concerning the abduction of Pastor Koh and have shown more interest in his alleged involvement in missions activities, gave the nation's celebration of the 60th anniversary of independence in 2017 a bitter undertone for many Christians. It is not just Christians who are targeted for such kidnapping - a civil society activist of Shiite faith was also abducted.

Despite the current corruption scandal (see next paragraph), the ruling party, UMNO, seems to have stabilized its power, which has led one newspaper to call Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak [“The Unsinkable”](#)²⁰³, however, the outcome of the next general elections (to take place sometime before mid-2018) remains open. The opposition is divided and despite all efforts – including founding a new party, split off from UMNO – has not been able to benefit from the government's weaknesses. However, reconciliation between long-term Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad (called Dr. M and now 92 years old), and former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim (currently in prison) has given opposition forces [new hope](#).²⁰⁴

²⁰¹ See: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2017/03/update-son-of-abducted-malaysian-pastor-suspects-he-may-have-been-murdered/>, last accessed 28 November 2017.

²⁰² See: <http://www.themalaymailonline.com/malaysia/article/wife-of-pastor-missing-for-200-days-pens-scathing-letter-to-igp#obRuulufwhm56QQT.97>, last accessed 28 November 2017.

²⁰³ See: <http://thediplomat.com/2017/06/the-unsinkable-najib-razak/>, last accessed 6 September 2017.

²⁰⁴ See: http://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/rsis/co17135-sealing-the-mahathir-anwar-alliance-will-they-unseat-najib/#.Wa_YgH-Wyhd, last accessed 6 September 2017.

The big corruption scandal concerning a development fund called “1MDB” is looming like a sword of Damocles above the prime minister's head, especially as international investigations in Switzerland and [the US](#)²⁰⁵ are not finished yet, but so far it has served to encourage everyone within UMNO to close ranks.

Malaysia follows an affirmative action policy by which Bumiputera (the “sons of the soil”), comprised of Malay and indigenous people receive state benefits when it comes to housing, schools and other government schemes. While in theory, (Christian) indigenous people in East Malaysia should benefit from this policy as well, in practice, this is rarely the case. As one Christian put it: “We are the bumi (= soil), they are the putra (= sons or princes)”.

In summer 2017, [another corruption probe](#)²⁰⁶ emerged against the Federal Land Development Authority (FELDA), further annoying the government. If the government is driven too far in the defensive, it will not hesitate to lash out against ethnic and religious minorities, including Christians.

The Muslim minority of Shiites is also severely persecuted in Malaysia, as was illustrated by the abduction of one of their activists. Hindu believers, adherents of traditional Chinese religions and Buddhists are also affected by the government’s preferential treatment of ethnic Malays.

Christian communities and how they are affected

To better understand Christianity in Malaysia, an additional explanation is required. For Malaysia, it can be more helpful to make distinctions according to geographical distribution and origin. The majority of Christians come from a *Bumiputra* background, which literally translated reads “son of the soil”, meaning that they belong to the country and come from the indigenous tribal population. From the government’s perspective, they qualify for affirmative action benefits like discounted houses, scholarships etc., but in practice this only applies as long as the *Bumiputra* are not Christians. If they become Christians, their privileges are quickly withdrawn. *Non-Bumiputra* Christians come mainly from the Chinese and Indian ethnic minorities and are divided up into a plethora of different denominations, ranging in size from house-churches to mega churches. Finally, the geographical distribution is important as well. Most *Bumiputra* Christians are living in the states of Sabah and Sarawak; the latter still holds a Christian majority. These states make up East Malaysia and are situated on the island of Borneo (which is shared with Brunei and Indonesia). To complicate the situation, many *Bumiputra* are migrating to West Malaysia for educational or economic reasons where it is especially hard for them to stay true to their Christian faith. Converts from a Muslim-Malay background complete the picture of the Malaysian church. These Christians face a high level of persecution as they not only leave their faith, but this decision is seen as acting against their very ethnicity and nation as well.

²⁰⁵ See: <http://www.benarnews.org/english/news/malaysian/1mdb-08112017204444.html>, last accessed 6 September 2017.

²⁰⁶ See: <http://www.benarnews.org/english/news/malaysian/felda-probe-08222017155511.html>, last accessed 6 September 2017.

Communities of expatriate Christians:

There are many nationalities who have their own Christian fellowships and are self-supporting. They struggle with obtaining legal status at times, but are basically free to live their faith as long as they stay within their walls. Nepali and Vietnamese Christians in most cases join the Historical Christian communities.

Historical Christian communities:

Examples are the Roman Catholic, Anglican, Methodist or Lutheran churches and the Protestant Church in Sabah. These are less affected by persecution than Non-traditional Christian communities or Communities of converts, but they do suffer from discrimination.

Communities of converts to Christianity:

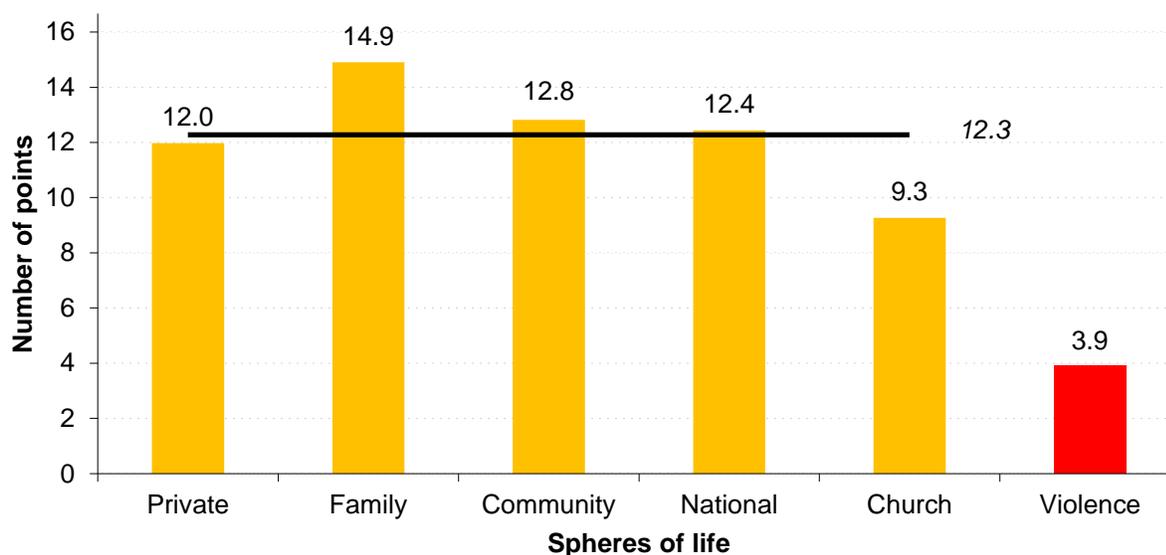
Christian converts from a Muslim background suffer most persecution. This is caused by family, friends, neighbors and the authorities.

Non-traditional Christian communities:

Examples are Evangelical, Baptist and Pentecostal congregations, Assemblies of God, Salvation Army, Sabah Injil Borneo and others. They often face monitoring, discrimination, intimidation and harassment.

Pressure in the 5 spheres of life and violence

WWL 2018 Persecution Pattern for Malaysia



(The maximum score for each block is 16.7)

The Persecution pattern shows:

- Overall, the pressure on Christians in Malaysia increased in almost all *Spheres of life*, causing the average pressure to be at a very high level, rising from a score of 11.7 in WWL 2017 to 12.3 in WWL 2018.
- Pressure is strongest in the the *Family, Community* and *National spheres of life*. While pressure in the *National sphere* is typical for countries where *Dictatorial paranoia* is active, the pressure in the *Family, Community* and *Private spheres* points to problems faced by converts from Islam and other religions, driven as well by the country's Islamization policy. Pressure resulting from the persecution engine *Islamic oppression* is present in all spheres. This is fueled by the government which is increasingly relying on Islamic conservatism in order to stay in power and to gather the support of ethnic Malays, as shown in the continuing saga of introducing Sharia law or the unsolved problem of unilateral conversion, referred to above.
- The score for violence against Christians almost doubled from 2.0 in WWL 2017 to 3.9 due to the abductions reported. Since persecution has been seldom violent, these shocked the Christian community all the more.

Private sphere:

By law, Malay Muslims are not allowed to convert from Islam in any state except Sarawak. The Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) wants the penalty for apostasy to be death. Malay converts cannot attend any public church activities. If they do so, they risk being caught by the authorities and the church attended will face serious consequences for welcoming them. Therefore, converts gather secretly in different homes for all their Christian activities, away from the prying eyes of government, community and the registered churches. Consequently, they have to be very careful in the way they worship, especially if they are the only Christians in their family. Bibles and other Christian materials have to be hidden carefully and can only be read with much caution as devout Muslim families will not tolerate it. Since Muslims who convert to Christianity are considered apostates, it is very risky for them to reveal their faith, as they will be punished or sent to an Islamic purification center where they are pressured into returning to Islam. Converts have been known to disappear from one day to the next with no-one knowing their whereabouts.

Family sphere:

According to law, children born to couples with one Muslim parent (either by birth or conversion), are automatically registered as Muslims. There have been many cases like this in Sabah for indigenous Christians. As Bumiputras, most of them have the word 'bin' or 'binti' in their names which leads the officers to believe they are Muslims and put 'Islam' as their religion in the MyKads (Identity card). This has been one of the main problems Bumiputra Christians have been facing but some of them do not attempt to 'fight' over it as the process is long and arduous and there have been very few successful results. Every Malaysian has an identity card and one's religion is recorded on this card by the Federal Registration Department. Once a citizen is registered as a Muslim, this can only be changed after long court proceedings - with no high likelihood of success - although in March 2016, the Rebit Rooney case, decided by the Sarawak High Court, brought some hope. It should be noted, however, that observers say that such a case

would have ended differently in West Malaysia. Malaysia seems to be the only country in the world where a religious conversion changes ethnicity as well. There are reported cases where children of converted natives suddenly ‘professed’ to be Muslim Malays when their real ethnicity is Iban. When asked why, they answered, "Because our (Muslim) teachers told us so!" The registration department also issues death certificates. If records show that the person who died had been registered as a Muslim, the authorities will inform the Islamic religious authority. If the burial rites are not celebrated according to Islam, this Islamic authority has the right to take the body away from the non-Muslim family so that they can perform Islamic rites for the deceased. In one case in February 2017, this happened to a deceased young student originating from Sarawak, who had been sent under a government scheme to a university in West Malaysia and was taken care of by a Malay family.

Christians with a Muslim background can also be forced to divorce (if married) and lose their inheritance rights, once discovered. Organizing a baptism, Christian wedding or funeral can become difficult or even impossible. Converts can be kept isolated by their families, or expelled from the family home, or even sent to Islamic purification (meaning re-education) camps. Children of converts have to attend Islamic education in schools and there are reports that Christian children are put under pressure to convert to Islam.

Some Christians from indigenous tribes, especially in Sabah, are converted to Islam by trickery. To accept financial help from the government, some of them handed in their identity card and signed a form not knowing that this was a declaration to convert to Islam. When they got back their card back, they realized that their religion has been changed to Islam. When they tried to reverse this, they were told by the Federal Registration Department that their religious status can only be changed if approval is given by the Sharia courts, which is impossible to obtain.

Community sphere:

Christians are monitored by state authorities as well as by local Muslim communities and Malay Islamic rights groups (e.g. Perkasa and ISMA). There is increasing pressure from the government to dress in accordance with Islamic customs. In remote areas in Sabah and Sarawak, Malay communities have access to water and electricity, but some known Christian native communities are denied such access. For qualifying for higher education and scholarships, Christians need to overcome far higher hurdles than Muslims due to the affirmative action policy in favor of Malays. Another part of this policy is that ethnic Malays get a 10% price reduction when they buy property while others need to pay the full price. This can be regarded as an indirect *jizya* tax, as far as Chinese and Indian Christians are considered, as they do not qualify for such benefits. Muslims are exempt from certain taxes because they pay the *zakat* and a reduced income tax, while others pay the full income tax. In one of his speeches in 2017, the Malaysian prime minister has promised that Malays will have more benefits if his political party (UMNO) stays in power, citing an example of reserving 50% of retail spaces to Malays on all the newly built Mass Rail Transport (MRT) stations. As for private businesses (for example owned by Chinese Christians), to get government contracts it is required by law that the owners must have *bumiputra* partners. To get round this, some companies are known to have ‘bumiputra partners’ on paper only. Converts face strong pressure from

family, friends and neighbors to recant their Christian faith. Christians experience discrimination in their business lives too and will not make it to higher positions in government employment.

National sphere:

The Constitution defines ethnic Malays as Muslims. That is why Malays do not have the religious liberty to leave Islam and embrace another religion. The Constitution also prohibits adherents of other religions from propagating their religion among Malay Muslims. Yet it allows Muslims to propagate Islam all over the country. Furthermore, Sharia law is in place in conjunction with civil law, and the proposed *hudud*-bill which plans to allow Islamic corporal punishment in the state of Kelantan is still pending in parliament, as the government put it on hold for the time being. On websites run by Malay Islamic rights groups and in government-owned media, Christians are frequently slandered, for example by spreading rumors that Christians and Jews want to take over Malaysia. One illustration of this was a seminar held at the Malacca campus of the Technical University Mara on the “threat of Christianization” in Malaysia. “Christian missionaries” are accused of stirring up social unrest and prominent Christian politician Hannah Yeoh has been publically accused of proselytizing through her autobiography “Becoming Hannah”, which simply tells her life story.

The country’s harsh sedition laws have drawn much condemnation from international observers. Although the law bans any act, speech or publication that brings contempt against the government or Malaysia’s nine royal sultans and prohibits people from inciting hatred between different races and religions, it is used one-sidedly. Those who instigate hatred and stoke racial and religious sentiments against Christians are never charged for sedition. Questioning the special position of the ethnic Malay majority and the natives of Sabah and Sarawak falls under sedition as well. Those who have spoken out against the government have mostly had to face sedition charges too. Indigenous people face aggressive, deliberate attempts to convert them to Islam, especially those who migrate to West Malaysia as it is easy to take advantage of their social uprooting and their economic vulnerability. In the long term, the Christian population may shrink because of this, especially in East Malaysia.

Church sphere:

Most non-traditional Christian communities are not registered as churches but operate as organizations or community centers, buying shop or factory premises to operate from. Whilst most churches are monitored, these do not face restrictions regarding their meetings. However, openly integrating Malay converts is impossible. All printing of Christian materials requires permission from the government. Restrictions are imposed on importing Bahasa Malaysia materials and the Bible and Christian Malay books from Indonesia are banned. In 2015, the government issued a SOP (standard operating procedure) according to which [all imported Christian publications](https://www.malaysiakini.com/letters/302177)²⁰⁷ (including the Malay Bible) are to be controlled by the Quranic Division of the Home Ministry. Despite objections from church leaders, the government went ahead with its implementation. Moreover, the use of the word “Allah” for God is practically banned for Christians, after the High Court banned the Christian usage of the term “Allah” for God, implemented against a Catholic newspaper and notwithstanding the fact that this term has been used for hundreds of

²⁰⁷ See: <https://www.malaysiakini.com/letters/302177>, last accessed 5 October 2017.

years in Bibles and other Christian publications and is used in the Bahasa Indonesia Bible without any problem. The proposal (which was made during the Jill Ireland case in November 2017) of asking the country's (Islamic) language institute to issue a [new Bible translation](#)²⁰⁸ without the word “Allah”, riled Christians. It also revealed the Islamic authorities mindset when they proposed getting a state authority to do the translation of the Bible - instead of Christians.

Violence:

On 30 November 2016, Pastor Joshua Hilmy and his wife Ruth [went missing](#)²⁰⁹ when they disappeared from their home in the state of Selangor. On 13 February 2017, Pastor Raymond Koh was abducted by a group of unknown men, while driving on a busy road in Petaling Jaya. This abduction took place [in broad daylight](#)²¹⁰ and was recorded by CCTV cameras. His whereabouts are unknown and there is speculation that the [government must have been involved](#)²¹¹.

Gender profile of persecution

Female/Male: No data available.

Future outlook

The ongoing saga of introducing Sharia law in the state of Kelantan shows the route ruling UMNO is taking. It is wooing conservative Muslims, bridging the gap to once-in-opposition conservative Muslim PAS, and if needed, widening and exploiting the already big ethnic and religious gap the country is suffering from. The youth movement of the Islamic opposition party PAS repeated the demand for a ban on Christian evangelism and added that state laws were currently “[insufficient to protect Islam](#)”²¹². One observer called Malaysia not a whole country, but rather “the sum of its different ethnic pieces”. However, the government seems to be determined to deepen this split.

The Malaysian Islamic State group (IS) leader in Syria [was killed](#)²¹³ by a drone attack in April 2017, which is slowing down recruiting efforts by IS. The militant group staged a first attack in Malaysia in June 2016 by detonating a grenade in Selangor, injuring eight. However, there are dozens and maybe hundreds of other suspects with links to IS. The fact that in neighboring Philippines IS-related groups succeeded in capturing

²⁰⁸ See: <http://www.themalaymailonline.com/malaysia/article/citing-sacred-patrimony-churches-reject-unauthorised-dbp-translation-of-bib#MgrrtO2bTjvdKwfsI.97>, last accessed 28 November 2017.

²⁰⁹ See: <http://www.benarnews.org/english/news/malaysian/missing-persons-04142017152813.html>, last accessed 6 September 2017.

²¹⁰ See: <http://www.themalaymailonline.com/malaysia/article/cctv-offers-possible-leads-on-missing-pastor#5olrRTui8UwE67Lz.97>, last accessed 6 September 2017.

²¹¹ See: <http://www.ucanews.com/news/mysterious-disappearances-of-pastors-activists-in-malaysia/78962>, last accessed 6 September 2017.

²¹² See: <http://www.themalaymailonline.com/malaysia/article/pas-youth-claims-state-laws-insufficient-to-protect-islam-curb-christian-ev#3LpgLoF0GGJdEUQx.97>, last accessed 6 September 2017.

²¹³ See: <http://www.benarnews.org/english/news/malaysian/terror-recruit-08222017160847.html>, last accessed 6 September 2017.

the city of Marawi in May 2017 sent shockwaves through the region and put all security services on high alert. Malaysia agreed to take up joint sea-patrols with Indonesia and the Philippines to counter Islamic militant activity in the Sulu Sea, but the threat is growing. Consequently, the situation in Malaysia will remain volatile, as its main persecution engine *Islamic oppression* remains active, leading to ongoing challenges and threats for the Christian minority.

In an encouraging turn of events, the Sultan of Johor made an [outspoken comment](#)²¹⁴ after a laundry shop had started a Muslim-only policy in the Malaysian state of Johor. He denounced such a policy, stating: “This is not a Taliban state and as the head of Islam in Johor, I find this action to be totally unacceptable as this is extremist in nature.” He also confirmed that Johor “belongs to all races and faiths”. But the federal government seems to follow another path as Malaysia has [granted asylum](#)²¹⁵ to the radical Muslim Indian preacher Zakir Naik, thought to have inspired the serious bomb attack in Dhaka/Bangladesh in 2016. This seems to have been made with an eye on elections coming up in mid-2018. Increasingly, the ruling parties are wooing conservative Muslims and maybe this indicates an increase in efforts towards further Islamization.

A shift towards more rigid and political Islamic practice is taking place with an influx of radical Islamic scholars returning from Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Many of these Malay scholars have joined the government as members of the Department of Islamic Advancement of Malaysia to preach in mosques and spread Islam. Islamization of native Christians from Sabah and Sarawak (East Malaysia) is happening at a fast rate. Sarawak still enjoys a greater degree of religious freedom compared to West Malaysia (it is the only place where Islam is not the state religion). But once the population demography tilts towards Islam, more Islamic laws will undoubtedly be set in place.

Policy considerations

- The attempt to enforce Sharia penal law (*hudud*) in the federal state of Kelantan and other states should be rejected as it severely violates rights of Christians and other non-Muslim minorities.
- The international community should increase its support to Malaysia in tackling Islamic State (IS) activities following an increased presence and the June 2016 attack in Selangor.
- The international community should demand that the Malaysian government ends the practice of putting Christian converts under house-arrest.
- The international community should call for the Malaysian government to investigate and end the use of bribes and similar enticements by local authorities to encourage conversion to Islam.

²¹⁴ See: <http://www.benarnews.org/english/news/malaysian/malaysia-muslims-09272017161657.html>, last accessed 28 November 2017.

²¹⁵ See: <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Kuala-Lumpur-grants-permanent-residency-to-Zakir-Naik,-who-inspired-the-Dhaka-massacre-42211.html>, last accessed 28 November 2017.

- The Malaysian government should enshrine the equality of Bumiputra (indigenous Malay) peoples and Chinese and Indian minorities before the law, in particular of Christians in these groups. Policies which deprive the right of Bumiputra Christians to government benefit schemes (unless they convert to Islam) should be revoked.
- The Malaysian government should repeal anti-conversion laws, laws banning Christian literature and materials, and laws that ban the use of the term “Allah” (God) by Christians.
- The Malaysian government should allow Bumiputra Christians, who were unwillingly converted to Islam through the *National Registration Department* (NRD) because their names reflect ‘bin’ or ‘binti’ (commonly used by Malay people), to change their religious identity back to Christian.
- In light of the recent cases of missing persons (including Pastors Raymond Koh, Joshua Hilmy and his wife, Ruth) the international community should demand that the Malaysian government do everything in their power to locate them and ensure that such disappearances do not happen again in the future.

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24. Myanmar

Reporting period: 1 November 2016 - 31 October 2017

Position on World Watch List (WWL)

WWL 2018 Points: 65 / Position: 24

WWL 2017 Points: 62 / Position: 28

WWL 2016 Points: 62 / Position: 23

The WWL 2018 score for Myanmar showed an increase of 3 points. The pressure on Christians increased in all *Spheres of life* but most noticeably in the *Private* and the *Family spheres* during the WWL 2018 reporting period. This is an indication of the increasing pressure converts from a Buddhist or Muslim background are facing from their families once their conversion is discovered. The score for violence decreased. However, this does not indicate an improvement, but rather illustrates the growing difficulties in obtaining reports from war-torn Christian minority areas, as is also acknowledged by other international organizations (see “Context”).

Persecution engines

Persecution engines in Myanmar ²¹⁶	
Islamic oppression	Very Weak
Religious nationalism	Very Strong
Ethnic antagonism	Weak
Denominational protectionism	Medium
Communist and post-Communist oppression	Not at all
Secular intolerance	Not at all
Dictatorial paranoia	Strong
Organized corruption and crime	Very Weak

Religious nationalism (Very strong):

Buddhism is weaved into the nation's culture and there are Buddhist communities which would like to remain purely Buddhist. This is commonly emphasized by radical Buddhists and tolerated - and to some extent supported - by the national government. The majority of Myanmar's population (an estimated 60%) is of Burmese ethnicity, also called *Bama*. Being *Bama* is equated with being Buddhist. Everyone deviating from this heritage is labelled as being outside the community and therefore potentially dangerous. Pressure on Christians comes from two sides: One side is society, which includes the radical Buddhist movement once called *969*, but now notorious under their acronym *Ma Ba Tha*. The fact that this movement was officially banned in May 2017 will not have real consequences (for details, see "Context" below). The other side causing pressure is the government which is attempting to establish a peace agreement with a plethora of ethnic groups, many of them Christian. The implementation of the "Laws for the Protection of Race and Religion" is a sign of the continued influence of radical groups. (For further details see: Spheres of life and violence.) The recent emergence of the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) and its violent attacks in August 2017 will fuel *Religious nationalism* even further (see: "Context" below).

Dictatorial paranoia (Strong):

Myanmar has a long history of being ruled by the army and while the newly elected government cannot be called paranoid, Myanmar is one of the very few cases where it is the army holding almost dictatorial powers. According to the country's Constitution, written by the *Tatmadaw* (the Burmese army) in 2008, one quarter of parliament's seats are reserved for military staff. Moreover, the army holds the most important government offices, including the Ministry of defense and the Ministries of interior and border affairs. Despite all hopes for democracy, the army has intensified its fight against insurgent groups as well as ethnic minorities (which include Christians). The fact that the war has continued despite all Peace Conference meetings shows where the true power lies.

The army will do everything to stay in control, calling upon Buddhist nationalism or ethnic heritage, if needed. The state continues to run so-called "Border Areas National Races Youth Development Training

²¹⁶ Scale for persecution engines and Drivers: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong

Schools” (or *Na Ta La* - schools), which are attractive for minority people as they are run without school fees. These schools are used to influence young people and to introduce them to Buddhism. The army has continued with its practice of weakening ethnic insurgencies by encouraging ethnic youth to become drug-addicted, a practice that is affecting Christian Kachin as well. One of Asia’s two largest opium-producing areas covers large parts of that region, especially Kachin State (together with parts of Vietnam, Laos and Thailand). It is widely known as the ‘Golden Triangle’. Parts of the country are largely run by the *Tatmadaw*. As many commodities like jade, timber and various ores can be found in predominantly Christian territories like Shan State or among the Chin and Kachin, these Christians face heavy pressure from the army (and not only out of economic interest). This takes the form of being harassed, attacked and being used as porters. Companies are often run by the military or high-ranking politicians, and nepotism rules. There is no desire to share the country’s wealth with its people. The recently emerging Muslim insurgency will empower the army even more.

Denominational protectionism (Medium):

Historical Christian communities are afraid of "sheep stealing" and order their members not to participate in activities with newer Christian groups.

Drivers of persecution

Drivers of persecution in Myanmar	
Government officials at any level from local to national	Strong
Ethnic group leaders	Strong
Non-Christian religious leaders at any level from local to national	Very Strong
Christian religious leaders at any level from local to national	Medium
Violent religious groups	Strong
Ideological pressure groups	Strong
Normal citizens (people from the general public), including mobs	Medium
Own (extended) family	Very Strong
Political parties at any level from local to national	Medium
Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups	Strong
Organized crime cartels or networks	Very Weak
Multilateral organizations (e.g. UN) and embassies	Not at all

Buddhist monk leaders stir up communities to persecute Christians in predominantly Buddhist communities. The radical Buddhist movement behind the Ma Ba Tha/969 groups continues to “protect” Buddhism as the country’s national religion. The recent ban on Ma Ba Tha activities does not change anything as they have found other ways to continue their influence. Strong Buddhist, Muslim and Ethnic-animist families actively persecute family members who convert to Christianity, as conversion is seen as a betrayal. Local government officials, especially from rural areas, are often biased towards Buddhist leaders, so minorities like Christians, who in many cases happen to be a religious and an ethnic minority, are disadvantaged and have no way of seeking justice. Last not least, the army will continue fighting against

the Christian insurgents and minorities as well. Insurgents sometimes also become drivers of persecution if they feel Christian churches are not supporting them strongly enough or when pastors are found advising young people not to join the fighting.

Context

The landslide victory for the opposition party “National League for Democracy” (NLD) under Noble Peace Prize Winner and freedom icon, Aung San Suu Kyi, in November 2015 raised many hopes, in the country itself and worldwide. The NLD appointed an ethnic Chin Baptist Christian as vice-president and a Christian leads the Upper House of parliament (both powerless positions). Although Aung San Suu Kyi took over a plethora of positions in order to compensate from being banned from presidency, recently questions have been asked whether or not she is [still truly championing](#)²¹⁷ democracy, human rights and reconciliation with minorities.

It has become increasingly clear that the army retains the strongest position, based on its constitutional claim for three important ministries and 25% of all seats in parliament. Without the army’s consent, no development may take place in the country, this is especially true for all questions related to war and reconciliation. The Burmese army has continued its attacks against ethnic minorities in Kachin and Shan State and even increased them. Christians are strongly affected and the level of violence is high.

The emergence of a Muslim insurgency with an organized group called ARSA (already mentioned under “Persecution engines” above) and the attacks carried out against border posts in October 2016 and [August 2017](#)²¹⁸, will add weight to the role of the army and no one will dare to question its position. It puts relations with neighboring Bangladesh under strain as well.

On 29 January 2017, prominent Muslim lawyer and ruling party NLD adviser Ko Ni [was shot](#)²¹⁹ at the airport of Yangon, raising fears that an even more volatile situation was about to erupt. When firebrand monk U Wirathu of the Ma Ba Tha publically praised the murder, the government-backed leadership of Buddhist monks (the Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee) [banned](#)²²⁰ him from preaching for one year in March 2017. The monk followed this decision by calling for meetings in which he would sit with mouth taped up but with recordings of his sermons playing in the background. When Ma Ba Tha continued to challenge the government, it was [banned by state Buddhist authorities](#)²²¹ in May 2017 but quickly re-grouped and re-branded under a different name. Since the ban and any punishments have to be implemented by the

²¹⁷ See: <http://www.aseantoday.com/2017/08/aung-san-suu-kyi-still-a-noble-democracy-champion/>, last accessed 6 September 2017.

²¹⁸ See: https://apnews.com/4c4e9b18794946a0a3dca967fe84d0d8/Ongoing-Myanmar-clashes-leave-96-dead-including-6-civilians?utm_source=Pew+Research+Center&utm_campaign=863009606d-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2017_08_25&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_3e953b9b70-863009606d-399904105, last accessed 6 September 2017.

²¹⁹ See: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-38793972>, last accessed 6 September 2017.

²²⁰ See: <http://www.ucanews.com/news/anti-muslim-monk-in-myanmar-barred-from-giving-sermons/78643>, last accessed 6 September 2017.

²²¹ See: <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/ban-05232017152958.html>, last accessed 6 September 2017.

Ministry of the Interior, which is run by the army (which has close contact with radical Buddhist groups like Ma Ba Tha), it will be interesting to see if and how such an implementation against its own allies will actually happen. One of its leading monks acknowledged in November 2017 that the re-branding did [not change anything](#).²²²

Aung San Suu Kyi's top priority remains the reconciliation process with ethnic minorities across the country. (Many of the ethnic minorities – like the Kachin, Chin and Karen – are predominantly Christian.) However, all 21st Century Panglong Conferences so far - taking place every six months - did not succeed in forging peace or even taking steps in trust-building and reconciliation. A plethora of questions still has to be solved, among them the return of IDPs and refugees (many of them from Christian ethnic minorities) displaced in China and Thailand. But even more necessary is the immediate start of a trust-building process, e.g. by implementing an immediate country-wide cease-fire. So far only the opposite has taken place: Fighting in Shan State and in Kachin State increased, where ongoing [clashes](#)²²³ created thousands of new IDPs. International organizations are hindered from entering the conflict areas in order to get humanitarian aid to the IDP camps and even the president of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) was [refused access](#)²²⁴ to some ethnic minority areas in May 2017. Senior army officers, former politicians and officials from insurgent groups are cooperating to make [huge profits](#)²²⁵ in Kachin State. They are taking over large expanses of agricultural land deserted by its owners – mainly Christians who are now forced to survive as IDPs in camps far away from the conflict zones.

Muslims also face much Buddhist opposition, which includes the ongoing violent clashes in Rakhine State and a very violent response by Muslim insurgency groups, allegedly supported by groups in neighboring Bangladesh, where an estimated 350,000 Rohingya refugees had already been [based](#)²²⁶ prior to the influx of hundreds of thousands of Rohingya fleeing ethnic cleansing at the hands of the Myanmar army.

Christian communities and how they are affected

Communities of expatriate Christians:

Since expatriate Christians join local churches, they are not treated as a separate WWL category here.

Historical Christian communities:

²²² See: <https://www.irrawaddy.com/opinion/commentary/rakhine-unrest-pushes-buddhist-nationalists-closer-army.html>, last accessed 28 November 2017.

²²³ See: <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/attack-by-kokang-fighters-in-myamanrs-shan-state-leaves-30-dead-03062017162108.html>, last accessed 6 September 2017.

²²⁴ See: <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/red-cross-chief-urges-govt-allow-access-conflict-areas.html>, last accessed 6 September 2017.

²²⁵ See: <https://www.irrawaddy.com/features/ex-ministers-armed-groups-operate-farms-kachins-conflict-areas.html>, last accessed 28 November 2017.

²²⁶ See: <http://www.refworld.org/country,,UNHCR,,BGD,,5964c3a24,0.html>, last accessed 28 November 2017.

This category consists of groups such as the Roman Catholic Church, but also traditional churches among the Christian minorities like the Kachin Baptist Church: These Christians are facing everyday pressure and occasional violent attacks, be it from the Burmese army or from radical Buddhist monks who are even building temples within church premises in some areas.

Communities of converts to Christianity:

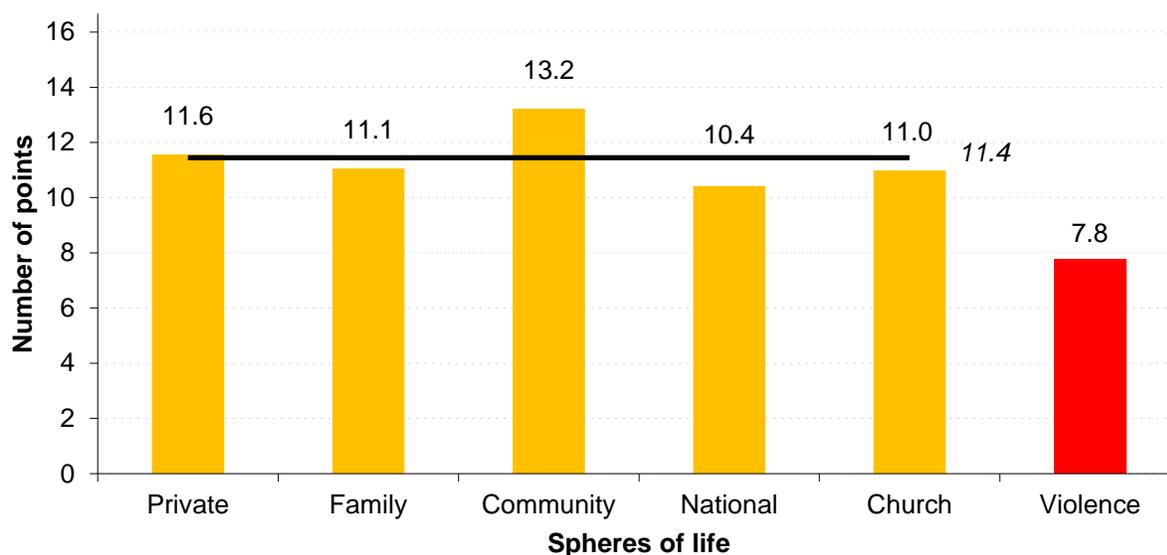
Converts from a Buddhist, Muslim or Ethnic-animist background are facing the strongest persecution both from the authorities and from families, friends and neighbors as well. Leaving Buddhism is not accepted for someone of Bama ethnicity. In all the publicity about Rohingya refugees being forced to flee to Bangladesh, it is less well-known that there is a small group of Christian converts from a Muslim background among the Rohingya who are affected by the sudden upsurge in violence and have had to flee as well. These Christians not only face persecution because of their ethnic affiliation, but also because their Muslim families and communities put them under enormous pressure to return to Islam.

Non-traditional Christian communities:

Groups such as Baptist, Evangelical, Pentecostal congregations, Assemblies of God, Methodists and Anglicans are facing persecution from the community they live in, especially in rural areas. They are not just monitored, but are sometimes also hindered from gathering or holding a Sunday school classes.

Pressure in the 5 spheres of life and violence

WWL 2018 Persecution Pattern for Myanmar



(The maximum score for each block is 16.7)

The Persecution pattern shows:

- The overall pressure on Christians in Myanmar increased in the WWL 2018 reporting period, with the average rising from 10.7 in WWL 2017 to 11.4 in WWL 2018.
- Pressure is strongest in the *Community, Private and Family spheres of life*. Pressure on converts is acute in all those spheres, while all Christians face strong pressure in the *National sphere* (high level pressure) and *Church sphere* (very high level pressure). This pressure is fuelled by an increasing emphasis on Buddhism, excluding all other minorities as well as by a continuing war against insurgencies, affecting - among others - predominantly Christian Kachin, Shan and Karen States. This war goes widely unnoticed, eclipsed by the widely publicized situation of the Rohingya.
- Violence against Christians fell from 9.1 (in WWL 2017) to 7.8 Due to increased fighting, especially in Kachin and Shan States, it has become almost impossible to obtain reports on faith-based attacks against Christians in these war-torn areas and on churches attacked. Two Baptist pastors were detained and abducted by the Myanmar army after leading journalists to the site of a destroyed Catholic church. The fact that they spent nineteen days in official military detention illustrates the challenges involved in getting reports out of the country (see “Violence” below).

Private sphere:

Conversion is mainly opposed by families and local communities. Converts from a Buddhist background have to be very careful in the way they worship, especially if they are the only Christians in their family and therefore considered responsible for bringing shame on the family. Meeting with other Christians is usually not dangerous, but can pose a special challenge for converts. Known converts are closely monitored, ostracized and may face house arrest in order to hinder them from meeting with other Christians. A pastor who used to live in a village with his family reportedly had to relocate them to the city in order to continue his ministry among the Christian believers, because it had become too dangerous for them in the village. Converts from a Muslim background are even more vulnerable since they are not only facing the above mentioned challenges, but also belong to a despised minority. There were reports of converts being ostracized and mocked for their faith during meals as well.

Family sphere:

Converts do not necessarily face the threat of losing their inheritance or custody rights, but women converts may well face the threat of getting divorced (if married). Organizing a baptism or a Christian wedding or funeral can become difficult - for converts with a Buddhist or Muslim background it has to be done in secret. The latter are also subjected to the wider Muslim minority’s problem of being denied citizenship. Muslim Rohingya and with them the minority of Christians from a Muslim background are perceived as being Bengalese and effectively lack any legal status. Most of them are now residing in refugee camps in neighboring Bangladesh. Parents face difficulties in raising their children according to Christian values as they face pressure from neighbors in Buddhist majority areas. In most schools, cultural and religious practice dictates that prior to the beginning of the class, students are required to recite some

of Buddha's teachings. Dhama Schools are conducted by Buddhist monks in order to teach children about Buddhist doctrines and are increasingly spreading across the country. Children are required to participate and contribute financially to the Buddhist festivals of water and light. In Na Ta La schools, children are taught prayer, their heads are shaven, and they have to beg for food every morning. Children are regularly bullied by Buddhist children in school. In the village schools it is normal to blame Christian children for anything. Christian children in school also receive less opportunities and will not be chosen for further education or special honors.

Community sphere:

There are communities that do not allow Christians in their villages. If a person converts in such a village they are subjected to strong harassment until they leave. But even in other villages, if Christians stop giving alms to Buddhist monks, refuse to contribute to the renovation or building of Buddhist temples, or desist from participating in Buddhist festivals, they are usually harassed, forced to donate and threatened with expulsion from the village. Christians, especially those gathering in house-churches, are monitored, pressured into renouncing their faith and excluded from communal decisions and resources. This pressure is also felt in everyday life when they are refused help in gathering bamboo for repairing houses or denied access to water. In one case reported in 2017, a Christian convert farmer was not allowed to irrigate his rice farm. Areas with a high percentage of Christians are deliberately disadvantaged through poor infrastructure and health care and the government prefers to build Na Ta La schools instead of regular state-run schools. In conflict zones, humanitarian aid to Christians is not allowed or is only given in minimal portions and international monitoring (or even access) is blocked.

Children of converts are facing discrimination by teachers and pupils at school. In one case a girl was removed from her class because of her faith; in another, a girl was not allowed to prepare for a test like the rest of the class. Children of Christians, not just of converts, have to attend non-Christian classes and can be forced to participate in Buddhist prayers or ceremonies. Especially if the families are poor and they come from an ethnic minority background, children will be sent to the *Na Ta La* schools, referred to above. Discrimination in grades, and the bullying and mocking of Christian children are common occurrences. In one case reported in 2017, Christians were not only forced to contribute to a Buddhist religious festival, they were also forced to contribute an amount three times higher than was asked from Buddhists. Another problem Christians are facing are the local oral laws (“Gamma laws”), declared in several communities and villages by Buddhist monks and officials in order to restrict Christians.

National sphere:

Section 361 of the 2008 Constitution reads: “The Union recognizes the special position of Buddhism as the faith professed by the great majority of the citizens of the Union” while also recognizing the presence of Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Animism in section 362. This “special position of Buddhism” has been abused by Buddhist radicals. In order to gain additional support from such groups and the *Bamar* majority in August 2015, the previous government adopted four religious conversion bills which aim to protect Buddhism by controlling conversion to other faiths, banning interfaith marriages and polygamy, and introducing birth controls. Buddhist women wishing to marry non-Buddhist men must first receive

permission from their parents and local government officials and the non-Buddhist men would first need to convert to the Buddhist faith.

Concerning conversion, the law states that anyone seeking to change their faith needs to get permission from the Religious Conversion Registration body, which is comprised of local religion and immigration officials, a local administrator, the women's affairs chairman and a local education officer. Thus, the community knows if a person wants to convert and they are given 3-6 months to try to convince him or her to withdraw their papers. The law's first target is the Muslim minority, but all other minorities are affected likewise as it has a chilling affect not just on citizens considering to convert, but on testifying about one's new faith as well. In Myanmar, some tribes have their own additional laws which are used by some communities to drive out Christians from their villages. Christians also have less access to loans and state benefits than non-Christian business partners or customers.

Church sphere:

While there are Christian church buildings in various parts of Myanmar, restrictions are in place to make it difficult to obtain permission for building new churches. There are up to eight different levels of permission required to build a church, and applications must pass through various military-run departments and district and township-level administrative offices often led by former army officers. As a result, applications for land ownership for churches almost never materializes.

Land-grabbing is another problem Christians are facing. This is why many Christians use business establishments as places of worship on Sundays or opt to gather in house-churches. Churches are monitored - especially in Buddhist dominated areas - and church leaders and pastors are targeted frequently by radical Buddhists as this is a way to paralyze the church. One pastor shared that it constantly feels as if everybody is waiting for him to make a mistake. All religious publications are censored and reviewed by the Ministry of Religious Affairs. Some churches have started to print their own materials, but owning printing presses is made very difficult, publishing in minority languages remains out of the question and strict censorship rules apply. Importing Christian materials is very difficult and even impossible in minority languages. Most churches are not allowed to invite foreign workers for religious purposes. Churches in ethnic minority areas face even more difficulties, as they are often regarded as being places for anti-government meetings and communication points for ethnic minority groups. In areas of civil war, like Kachin and Shan State, church buildings are frequently targeted for attack as people use them for refuge from the fighting.

Violence:

Three Kachin Christians are reported to have been [killed](#)²²⁷ while in the custody of government forces on 26 May 2017. They were seen being dragged away by soldiers, with their hands tied. A day after being abducted, they were killed by the soldiers at Hka Pra Yang, about 4 miles from Mung Hkawng. There were

²²⁷ See: <https://www.irrawaddy.com/features/ex-ministers-armed-groups-operate-farms-kachins-conflict-areas.html>, last accessed 28 November 2017.

²²⁷ See: <http://www.ucanews.com/news/baptist-leader-wants-lawful-investigations-into-murder-of-kachins/79389>, last accessed 6 September 2017.

reports about at least five more Christians killed, but these killings could not be independently verified. The Myanmar army [destroyed a Catholic church](#)²²⁸ in Mung Koe in a bombardment aimed at ethnic rebel militias in Shan State on 3 December 2016. Two Baptists, Langjaw Gam Seng and Dumdaw Nawng Lat, were [arrested](#)²²⁹ by the army in January 2017, when they showed a bombed Catholic church to a journalist. They were sentenced to four years and three months and two years and three months respectively on 29 October 2017. Physical attacks against converts were reported in July 2017 and attacks by the army against Christians in Kachin or Shan State are commonplace.

Gender profile of persecution

Female/Male: No data available.

Future outlook

Myanmar received bad international headlines in the WWL 2018 reporting period, particularly related to the Rohingya refugee crisis, especially after the UN Human Rights chief spoke in September 2017 of a [“textbook example of ethnic cleansing”](#).²³⁰ Little progress has been made and the country seems doomed to carry on waging its decades-old wars. The recent emergence of a violent Muslim insurgency will further fuel the persecution engine *Religious nationalism* which in turn will affect the Christian ethnic minorities as well. The situation of the Rohingya, often dubbed as the “most persecuted minority of the world” may even serve as a rallying cry for radical Muslims across the region and add to an already increasing radicalism, given that hundreds were killed and an estimated 600,000 or more refugees driven into neighboring Bangladesh. The [Annan report](#)²³¹, published on 24 August 2017 and aimed at solving ethnic and religious tensions, seems to have been overtaken by subsequent violence. The fact that the latest series of attacks against border posts started on the same day the Annan report was published, is more than a coincidence, it seems to be following a deliberate plan of escalation.

While radical Buddhist groups like Ma Ba Tha suffered a certain backlash from fellow Buddhist groups and politicians, it is unlikely that their influence and rhetoric against non-Buddhist minorities will cease. Following the ban, [supporter groups](#)²³² sprouted up all over the country to collect signatures in support of the banned movement. With the increase of violent attacks by Muslims, radical Buddhism will be fueled

²²⁸ See: <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Clashes-in-Shan-State:-St.-Francis-Xavier-church-in-Mung-Koe-destroyed-39320.html>, last accessed 6 September 2017.

²²⁹ See: <http://us10.campaign-archive2.com/?u=f15b18127e37f74088063b773&id=6b57316221&e=f769658b1c>, last accessed 6 September 2017.

²³⁰ See: <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=57490#.Wh2VtH9LFu1>, last accessed 28 November 2017.

²³¹ See: <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/annan-commission-calls-on-myanmar-to-resolve-rohingya-crisis-in-rakhine-08242017154540.html>, last accessed 5 October 2017.

²³² See: <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/love-wirathu-campaigns-launched.html>, last accessed 6 September 2017.

as well. This is possibly best reflected by a report which [quoted Ashin Wirathu](#),²³³ one of the most outspoken and radical Buddhist monks, as saying: “I am only warning people about Muslims. Consider it like if you had a dog that would bark at strangers coming to your house – it is to warn you. I am like that dog. I bark.”

The army’s role is likely to further increase both in politics and in fighting against insurgents. Another incentive to retain its strong position is that it is deeply involved in legal and illicit trade, which mainly affects predominantly Christian areas like Kachin State. The level of violence has not decreased despite all progress in democratization and the non-inclusive ceasefire agreements. There are many problems complicating peaceful solutions: For instance, army staff and some ethnic insurgents are involved in drug trafficking and the exploitation of resources like jade and timber. Trust-building will be impossible as long as the army offensives continue against the largely Christian Kachin minority and the fighting in Karen State persists. The reconciliation process is very slow and a stalemate is feared, especially as virtually all government (and military) resources are currently focused on the Rohingya minority and the ARSA. The signs are [not very promising](#)²³⁴ for the vision of a democratic and federal state developing. It has to be kept in mind that Aung San Suu Kyi [does not have full power](#)²³⁵ and, in practice, the army is completely autonomous.

After a two-year delay, the Myanmar authorities finally published (in July 2016) the section of the 2014 census [concerning religious affiliation](#)²³⁶. The delay was due to fears that the findings might cause an uproar. The Buddhist nationalist group, Ma Ba Tha, has regularly warned that a growing Muslim population is a threat to the Buddhist country. But according to statistics, Muslims experienced only a slow growth, even including the Rohingya who were not counted in the census. But Ma Ba Tha is not just anti-Muslim, it is Buddhist nationalist. It is likely that the Buddhist nationalist group will increasingly focus on the Christian community since the latter experienced [considerable growth](#)²³⁷ from 4.6% in 1973 to 6.2% in 2014. Reportedly, the numbers of Christians in the contested Kachin State were heavily underestimated.

Policy considerations

Currently under review.

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²³³ See: <https://theconversation.com/militant-buddhism-is-on-the-march-in-south-east-asia-where-did-it-come-from-86632>, last accessed 28 November 2017.

²³⁴ See: <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/official-peace-talks-unfc-cancelled-amid-stalemate-fears.html>, last accessed 28 November 2017.

²³⁵ See: <http://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/rsis/co17183-after-shaming-aung-san-suu-kyi-then-what/#.Wh2YQH9LFu1>, last accessed 28 November 2017.

²³⁶ See: <http://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asiapacific/myanmar-census-data/2976354.html>, last accessed 14 December 2016.

²³⁷ See: <http://www.mmtimes.com/index.php/national-news/21542-after-long-delay-religious-census-data-proves-less-sensitive-than-anticipated.html>, last accessed 14 December 2016.

25. Nepal

Reporting period: 1 November 2016 - 31 October 2017

Position on World Watch List (WWL)

WWL 2018 Points: 64 / Position: 25

WWL 2017 Points: 53 / Position: Not in WWL Top 50

WWL 2016 Points: 53 / Position: Not in WWL Top 50

With a score of 64 points Nepal ranks 25th on WWL 2018. This is an increase of 11 points compared to the WWL 2017 reporting period when Nepal did not make it into the Top 50. Persecution stems mainly from Hindu radicals, with ethnic tensions adding to the pressure in the background. The situation for Christians in Nepal deteriorated markedly in all *Spheres of life* and is due to a strong rise in *Religious nationalism*, with Hindu radicals becoming much more active. Government officials, Hindu priests, Hindu political parties and family, friends, and community have all stepped up pressure. In this context, the number of violent incidents also increased. There were reports on churches attacked, arrests, Christians being sentenced to jail, dozens of Christians were beaten up, and there were Christians who had to flee their homes and villages because of threats.

Persecution engines

Persecution engines ²³⁸ in Nepal	
Islamic oppression	Not at all
Religious nationalism	Very strong
Ethnic antagonism	Medium
Denominational protectionism	Not at all
Communist and post-Communist oppression	Weak
Secular intolerance	Not at all
Dictatorial paranoia	Very weak
Organized corruption and crime	Weak

Religious nationalism (Very strong):

Most of the persecution of Christians in Nepal comes from Hindu radical groups who want to turn Nepal into a Hindu state again. These radical Hindu groups have close ties with Hindutva groups in neighboring India. Persecution used not to be driven by government, but since 2015 a new constitution has been

²³⁸ The scale for the level of influence of Persecution engines and Drivers in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong.

adopted, limiting freedom of religion. On 8 August 2017 the Nepalese parliament also passed anti-conversion legislation which was signed into law by the president on [16 October 2017](#)²³⁹. Another sign of a deteriorating situation for Christians.

Ethnic antagonism (Medium):

From time to time there are tensions between the various ethnic groups in Nepal. In most cases, this is linked to *Religious nationalism*.

Drivers of persecution

Drivers of persecution in Nepal	
Government officials at any level from local to national	Strong
Ethnic group leaders	Medium
Non-Christian religious leaders at any level from local to national	Strong
Christian religious leaders at any level from local to national	Not at all
Violent religious groups	Strong
Ideological pressure groups	Not at all
Normal citizens (people from the general public), including mobs	Medium
Own (extended) family	Strong
Political parties at any level from local to national	Strong
Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups	Not at all
Organized crime cartels or networks	Weak
Multilateral organizations (e.g. UN) and embassies	Not at all

Pressure on Christians is exerted by Hindu radicals in various ways: Local and national authorities (*Government officials* and *Political parties*) impose legal and other restrictions; local Hindu priests (*Non-Christian religious leaders*) and Hindu radical movements (*Violent religious groups*) carry out physical attacks against Christians, and local people (mobs consisting of the *Extended family* and *Normal citizens*) form a hostile environment at the village level. Parallel to this, Nepal is ethnically divided – *Ethnic group leaders* also exert pressure on converts because they deviate from the faith of the ancestors.

Context

[Christianity in Nepal](#)²⁴⁰ has been on the rise since the government adopted a secular democracy in 2008, a trend that has reportedly been driven by natural disasters and changes in society. Christian missionaries were previously banned from entering the country before absolute monarchy came to an end in 2008, but it is now home to more than 8,000 Christian churches and over a million converts. Minority groups like the

²³⁹ See: <http://www.csw.org.uk/2017/10/20/press/3763/article.htm>, last accessed 7 December 2017.

²⁴⁰ See: <http://www.persecution.org/2016/12/06/christianity-continuing-to-grow-in-nepal-despite-persecution/>, last accessed 7 December 2017.

Dalits and the Kirats have been drawn to Christianity since Nepal adopted a secular form of government in 2008. According to the Federation of National Christians in Nepal, Dalits make up 60 percent of all believers in the country.

The political map of Nepal has been quite helpful for the Christian minority in Nepal. First of all, fears that the new Constitution of Nepal would make the country officially Hindu again subsided when the Constitution was published in September 2015. Secondly, many political parties recognize the great potential of Christians (a rapidly growing community in Nepal) for their position. In May 2017 Christians were chosen as representatives of some local units in the first phase of local elections held for the first time in Nepal's history.

One remnant of the fact that Hinduism used to be the state religion is the caste system – a hierarchical stratification of society dating back many centuries. It can be compared to some extent to the class society that Europe had about seven centuries ago. Each human being is born into a specific caste and he can never escape from it. According to tradition called *varna*, there are four castes (Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras), plus a list of groups, now known as Dalits, who were historically excluded from the *varna* system altogether, and are still ostracized as untouchables. Many Christians in Nepal are from Dalit background – the appeal of Christianity for them stems from the sense of acceptance they get from their co-believers. Most Christians in Nepal belong to the lower social strata and have low incomes.

Christians are not the only believers who are being persecuted in Nepal. Muslims are also targeted.

Christian communities and how they are affected

Communities of expatriate Christians:

These are mainly foreigners in Nepal who have their own, isolated meetings. They are hardly active in evangelism. These churches have been less affected by Hindu nationalism in the past, but they will experience limitations, for example in outreach, when the country's new Constitution is implemented.

Historical Christian communities:

By far the largest and most important of these is the Roman Catholic Church, plus a few Orthodox communities. They tend to be inward-looking and not involved in evangelistic activities. As a result, these communities are hardly exposed to hostilities from radical Hindus.

Communities of converts to Christianity:

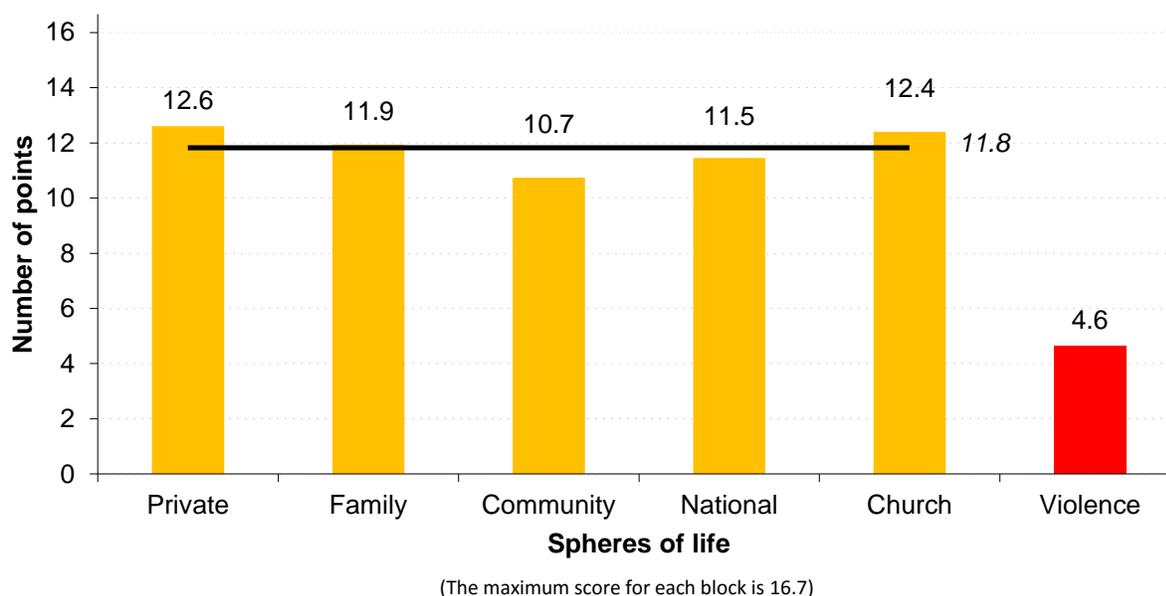
Christians from a Hindu background are the largest group of Christians in Nepal and their numbers have continued to grow spectacularly over the years. They are facing the highest levels of persecution of all Christian communities in Nepal, with much pressure coming from local government officials, Hindu priests, family and community.

Non-traditional Christian communities:

The non-traditional Christian communities mostly consist of independent churches. Converts from Hinduism will usually go the churches belonging to this category. As these churches are also most active in evangelism they experience high levels of persecution.

Pressure in the 5 spheres of life and violence

WWL 2018 Persecution Pattern for Nepal



The Persecution pattern for Nepal shows:

- The average pressure on Christians in Nepal was 11.8, rising from 9.9 in WWL 2017 which points to a clear deterioration in the situation for Christians.
- Pressure is highest in the *Private sphere of life* (especially for converts) with 12.6 points and in the *Church sphere* with 12.4 points. *Religious nationalism* has made life for Christians with a Hindu background more difficult and new legislation has imposed more restrictions on church life.
- The score for violence rose from 3.1 in WWL 2017 to 4.6 points. There were no killings but Christians were arrested and sentenced on various occasions.

Private sphere:

Converts always have to be very careful in the way they worship, especially if they are the only Christians in their family. Opposition from family and community makes it dangerous to keep Christian materials, especially in the remote areas. If converts are living with devout Hindu families, Bibles and other Christian materials have to be hidden carefully and can only be read with much caution. There is much opposition towards sharing the Christian faith with family and friends. Christianity is considered a foreign religion especially attractive for low caste people. Known converts are often closely monitored and there have

been reports that youth who had accepted Christian faith while studying in Kathmandu, have been called back to their villages by their families.

Family sphere:

Organizing a baptism has become much more risky as those Christians attending will be accused of proselytism according to the new constitution. Celebrating a Christian wedding faces the danger of being stopped; a wedding is frequently opposed by converts' families since it could strengthen the converts' new faith. Christian funerals are impossible as the churches are not given any burial grounds, so Christians are forced to either bury their deceased secretly or cremate them. Christian converts face opposition when trying to raise their children according to Christian beliefs. The hostility often arises from their own non-Christian spouse and also family members. Children of Christians, not just of converts, will be forced to learn non-Christian teachings and mocked by other children. Converts can be isolated from their families and reports from Western Nepal show that converts are sometimes forced to leave their family homes.

Community sphere:

Over the WWL 2018 reporting period, society became more opposed to Christians. Christians are viewed with dislike, as a result of which they are threatened or obstructed in their daily lives. Especially in rural areas, converts face strong pressure from family, friends and neighbors to recant their Christian faith. This is often accompanied by an intensive social boycott which includes private and business life. Children of converts often have to face discrimination by teachers and co-students in schools, especially if they deny taking part in the *Pooja*, an act of worshipping Hindu gods and goddesses.

National sphere:

The new constitution, referred to several times above, reads in Part III on Fundamental Rights on the paragraph on Religion: "5. Religion: Every citizen, having regard to the current traditions, may practice and profess his own religion as handed down from the ancient times. Provided that no person shall be entitled to change of his religion." There are still plans pending to introduce a space for religious affiliation on the new national ID card, but the government has had to take care of priorities first. The media frequently portray the presence and continuing growth of Christianity as a result of mere bribing by foreigners. Acts of conversion are described as a trade of favors in the sense that the convert gets incentives for his decision. Christians are frequently the victims of smear campaigns and radical Hindu groups mislead society with false information and cause increasing mistrust. Perpetrators attacking Christians have frequently been left unpunished, whereas Christians falsely accused of crimes did not receive a fair trial.

Church sphere:

There is no legal recognition of churches. Church property is registered in the name of private persons only. There is no provision for registering churches. According to reports by locals from different sources, after the earthquake in April 2015 the government announced that it would help rebuild temples, mosques and Buddhist shrines, but did not include churches, which illustrates the bias against Christianity. Gatherings and church meetings were also disrupted, for example in the Dhading district. Church activities are and will be increasingly monitored in order to see if churches are converting people and whether therefore authorities or radical groups can act against them. The report by a Canadian satire magazine

stating that the Gideons International would ship Bibles to Nepal instead of emergency aid in 2015 was taken seriously by radical Hindu groups in Nepal and in India alike, indicating that it is becoming increasingly risky to distribute Bibles and other Christian materials.

Violence:

Persecution in Nepal is increasing as Hindu radicals are stepping up their pressure against other religions. Violence is much lower than in India, but it is clearly increasing when compared with the WWL 2017 reporting period. No Christians were killed but it was reported that 47 Christians were seriously beaten and a Christian's home damaged by an attack. 14 Christians had to go into hiding after threats. Local Nepalese Christians also reported that three churches were damaged by attacks. Seven Christians who were arrested in July 2016 were still in detention in October 2017 without formal charges. Four Christians were sentenced to five years' imprisonment on 21 July 2017. No Christians were kidnapped or raped during the WWL 2018 reporting period, but five Christians were forced to marry.

Further examples:

- Christians in Nepal continue to struggle to obtain rights for a burial ground where they can legally bury their dead. Because of the lack of official burial grounds, Christians are often forced to bury their dead in forests illegally. At times, local Hindu radicals, enraged by the Christian burials, dig up the bodies and bring them back to the homes of the Christian families or even leave the bodies in the streets. Again, the Christian community is petitioning the government to allot them land to officially bury their dead, but the issue remains unresolved. (Source: [International Christian Concern](#)²⁴¹)
- On 18 April 2017 "unknown persons" attempted to set the Catholic Cathedral in Kathmandu on fire. The fire damaged the priest's residence and the western part of the church. A car and two motorbikes were also completely burnt. No casualties were reported. (Source: [UCAN](#)²⁴²)
- Seven people, including proprietors of two private schools, were arrested on 9 June 2016 in Dolakha district, Nepal, accused of converting others to Christianity because they were distributing Bible handbooks to children. A few days later, on 14 June 2016, the authorities also took into custody Rev Shakti Pakhrin for his ties with the people already under investigation for proselytizing. They were all acquitted in December 2016. (Source: [Christian Solidarity Worldwide](#)²⁴³).

Gender profile of persecution

Female:

Christian women and girls are also subjected to physical violence but it comes gradually after emotional and mental torture. In an initial phase, they are emotionally tortured by the immediate family members

²⁴¹ See: <http://www.persecution.org/2017/01/09/christians-in-nepal-continue-to-struggle-to-find-burial-grounds/>, last accessed 7 November 2017.

²⁴² See: <https://www.ucanews.com/news/arson-attack-on-church-in-nepal/78977>, last accessed 7 November 2017.

²⁴³ See: <http://www.csw.org.uk/2016-nepal-charikot>, last accessed 7 November 2017.

(e.g. husband, in-laws, parents). Gradually the mental and physical torture starts until finally they are regarded as social outcasts by the family and community. This makes them vulnerable and victims of sexual oppression.

Nepal is a patriarchal society where girls have less opportunities. Education and exposure to wider society is minimal as they are limited within the boundaries of home with a large amount of household duties. Those who become Christians do so mainly through witnessing healings and miracles in their own or closest family life.

Male:

Most Christian men and boys are subjected to physical, mental and social forms of suffering as they are usually ostracized from family and society. They are also denied their ancestral property and even basic human rights such as citizenship by immediate family members and village level government units. Christian men mostly migrate to new cities or areas to start a new identity and are economically deprived in the first phases of persecuted life.

In many cases, Christian men and boys are the breadwinner of the family. After being persecuted, the family often suffers through a reduced income as the men and boys are severely beaten and socially ostracized. Often the local police administration takes the male Christians away for intensive and lengthy interrogation. Thus, when men and boys suffer the whole family is in trouble economically and insecure socially.

Future outlook

The adoption of the Constitution and anti-conversion law has legitimized the persecution of Christians where they are perceived as proselytizing. Moreover, with the Constitution adopting a secular stance, the pro-Hindu lobby has become more vocal and hostile in their demands for Nepal to be made a Hindu state. This has meant that there is a growing sense of antagonism towards Christians and other minorities from radical Hindus. One thing seems sure: Christians will be the religious minority most affected by the implementation of the 2015 Constitution as they are the strongest in reaching out to the Hindu majority.

Policy considerations

The international community should request the Nepalese Government to:

- abolish Articles 156 and 160 which criminalize proselytization and conversion, since both these laws are curtailing the freedom of religion and are being used against Christians.
- investigate and prosecute those responsible for attacking Christians, socially boycotting them and expelling them from their villages.

- give official recognition to churches as religious institutions and to Christian rituals performed in the churches.
- give the Christian community legal burial grounds.
- give special instructions to the police and district administrations to ensure the safety of the churches.

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