



AFGHANISTAN: Country dossier

April 2018



Open Doors

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

Open Doors International / World Watch Research Unit

April 2018 / 2

research@od.org

www.opendoorsanalytical.org

World Watch List 2018

		1. Private Life	2. Family Life	3. Community Life	4. National Life	5. Church Life	6. Violence	TOTAL SCORE WWL 2018	TOTAL SCORE WWL 2017	TOTAL SCORE WWL 2016	TOTAL SCORE WWL 2015	TOTAL SCORE WWL 2014
Rank	Country	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score
1	North Korea	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	10.6	94	92	92	92	90
2	Afghanistan	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	10.0	93	89	88	81	78
3	Somalia	16.0	16.2	16.1	16.3	16.4	10.4	91	91	87	90	80
4	Sudan	14.2	14.5	14.3	15.6	16.0	12.0	87	87	84	80	73
5	Pakistan	14.4	13.5	13.8	15.0	13.1	16.7	86	88	87	79	77
6	Eritrea	15.2	14.5	15.8	16.1	15.2	9.4	86	82	89	79	72
7	Libya	15.2	15.3	14.2	15.7	15.5	10.4	86	78	79	76	71
8	Iraq	14.7	14.7	14.9	14.9	15.1	11.3	86	86	90	86	78
9	Yemen	16.7	16.6	16.4	16.5	16.7	2.6	85	85	78	73	74
10	Iran	14.0	14.1	14.5	15.8	16.4	10.0	85	85	83	80	77
11	India	12.6	12.7	13.2	14.7	12.9	14.4	81	73	68	62	55
12	Saudi Arabia	14.9	13.7	14.2	15.5	16.4	4.1	79	76	76	77	78
13	Maldives	15.2	15.5	13.5	15.8	16.7	1.1	78	76	76	78	77
14	Nigeria	11.8	11.5	13.1	12.1	12.1	16.5	77	78	78	78	70
15	Syria	14.4	14.3	14.1	14.5	14.7	3.7	76	86	87	83	79
16	Uzbekistan	15.5	12.1	13.0	13.1	16.0	3.5	73	71	70	69	68
17	Egypt	11.3	12.8	12.2	11.7	9.5	12.4	70	65	64	61	61
18	Vietnam	12.4	8.4	12.7	14.2	13.8	7.4	69	71	66	68	65
19	Turkmenistan	15.2	10.3	12.9	12.8	15.2	1.9	68	67	66	63	62
20	Laos	12.9	8.6	13.6	13.9	14.9	3.5	67	64	58	58	62
21	Jordan	13.2	13.3	11.5	10.9	13.0	4.3	66	63	59	56	56
22	Tajikistan	13.3	11.3	11.8	11.8	12.9	4.3	65	58	58	50	47
23	Malaysia	12.0	14.9	12.8	12.4	9.3	3.9	65	60	58	55	49
24	Myanmar	11.6	11.1	13.2	10.4	11.0	7.8	65	62	62	60	59
25	Nepal	12.6	11.9	10.7	11.5	12.4	4.6	64		(not in WWL)		
26	Brunei	14.3	14.2	10.7	10.2	13.5	0.9	64	64	61	58	57
27	Qatar	13.4	12.9	11.7	11.3	14.1	0.0	63	66	65	64	63
28	Kazakhstan	12.8	10.0	10.2	12.2	13.7	3.7	63	56	55	51	49
29	Ethiopia	9.8	10.0	10.8	10.9	10.5	10.4	62	64	67	61	65
30	Tunisia	11.9	13.2	10.6	10.7	12.0	3.9	62	61	58	55	55
31	Turkey	12.5	9.7	9.8	11.7	9.6	8.7	62	57	55	52	(not in WWL)
32	Kenya	12.0	10.9	10.0	7.9	11.7	9.4	62	68	68	63	48
33	Bhutan	11.9	11.6	12.4	11.4	13.1	1.1	62	61	56	56	54
34	Kuwait	13.4	12.6	11.6	10.9	12.3	0.4	61	57	56	49	50
35	Central African Republic	9.0	8.1	10.1	8.9	8.8	16.1	61	58	59	67	67
36	Palestinian Territories	12.1	12.8	10.7	10.5	12.6	1.1	60	64	62	58	53
37	Mali	11.4	9.6	11.2	8.1	9.2	9.6	59	59	55	52	54
38	Indonesia	10.3	11.0	11.5	10.0	9.3	6.9	59	55	55	50	46
39	Mexico	8.3	7.6	12.1	10.7	9.7	10.4	59	57	56	55	(not in WWL)
40	United Arab Emirates	13.6	12.2	10.0	10.4	11.8	0.2	58	55	55	49	51
41	Bangladesh	10.4	8.8	11.4	9.6	7.5	10.0	58	63	57	51	46
42	Algeria	12.3	13.1	7.5	10.4	12.4	2.0	58	58	56	55	54
43	China	9.2	7.2	8.0	10.7	13.3	9.1	57	57	57	57	51
44	Sri Lanka	11.1	7.6	10.5	11.3	10.1	6.9	57	55	(not in WWL)	51	55
45	Azerbaijan	13.1	9.1	9.3	11.1	12.4	2.4	57	(not in WWL)	57	50	(not in WWL)
46	Oman	12.1	12.2	9.9	9.4	12.6	1.1	57	53	53	55	56
47	Mauritania	11.5	11.3	11.1	12.2	11.0	0.0	57	55	(not in WWL)	50	51
48	Bahrain	12.9	13.1	10.2	9.9	10.3	0.2	57	54	54	(not in WWL)	48
49	Colombia	7.9	7.6	11.9	8.6	8.5	11.9	56	53	55	55	56
50	Djibouti	12.2	12.2	10.3	9.9	11.7	0.0	56	57	58	60	46

WWL 2018 Persecution Watch Countries¹

		1. Private Life	2. Family Life	3. Community Life	4. National Life	5. Church Life	6. Violence	TOTAL SCORE WWL 2018
Rank	Country	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score
51	Comoros	11.7	11.5	9.1	9.4	13.9	0.4	56
52	Kyrgyzstan	11.7	9.5	10.0	8.1	11.6	2.8	54
53	Tanzania	10.1	10.3	10.1	9.5	9.0	3.9	53
54	Russian Federation	11.1	8.4	10.1	8.9	10.7	2.0	51
55	Morocco	10.4	11.5	7.6	8.8	12.0	0.6	51
56	Cuba	8.5	4.9	10.7	10.4	12.2	2.4	49
57	Uganda	10.9	8.7	9.5	8.7	4.8	3.9	46
58	Niger	9.9	9.7	9.0	7.0	7.1	2.6	45

¹ These countries reached a score of 41 points or more but did not receive enough points to be included in the WWL Top 50.

AFGHANISTAN – Country dossier (April 2018)

No copyright - This report is the property of World Watch Research (WWR), the research department of Open Doors International. It may be used and distributed free of charge, but please always acknowledge WWR as the source.

Contents

World Watch List 2018.....	1
Introduction	2
WWL 2018: Keys to understanding Afghanistan.....	3
WWL 2018: Church History and Facts.....	5
WWL 2018: Short & Simple Persecution Profile	7
WWL 2018: Persecution Dynamics	9
WWR in-depth reports.....	19
Open Doors article(s) from the region.....	19
World Watch Monitor news articles.....	19
Recent country developments.....	20

Introduction

This country report is a collation of documents based around [Open Doors World Watch List \(WWL\)](#)¹ including statistical information on world religions, Christian denominations, and people groups prepared by the World Christian Database ([WCD](#))². Further news and analysis is supplied by [World Watch Monitor](#)³ and WWR staff.

AFGHANISTAN		
World Watch List	Score	Rank
WWL 2018	93	2
WWL 2017	89	3
WWL 2016	88	4
WWL 2015	81	5
WWL 2014	78	5

¹ See: <https://www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution/countries/>

² WCD website: <http://www.brill.com/publications/online-resources/world-christian-database>

³ See: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/>

WWL 2018: Keys to understanding AFGHANISTAN

Link for general background information:

See BBC country profile: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-south-asia-12011352>

Recent country history

In 1996 Taliban seized control of Kabul and imposed radical Sharia law until 2001 when they were ousted from power by the US-led military invasion. In 2004 Hamid Karzai won the first presidential elections and in 2005 the first parliamentary elections were held for more than 30 years. In 2014 NATO formally ended its combat mission in Afghanistan.

Elections in 2014 led to a political stand-off, which could only be solved when the former foreign minister and ethnic Tajik, Abdullah Abdullah, acknowledged his defeat and accepted Ashraf Ghani as the new president. Abdullah was then announced CEO of the country, a position nowhere to be found in the Afghan constitution.

The religious landscape

Officially there are no Christians in this 99% Muslim state, apart from international military staff, diplomats and NGO workers. Indigenous Christians (mostly those with a Muslim background) are in hiding as much as possible. 90% of Muslims follow Sunni Islam, while 9.7% adhere to Shiite Islam. The Hazara tribe is predominantly Shiite, while the main ethnic group, the Pashtu, are Sunni. They dominate the political landscape, but are in need of such minorities as the Uzbeks and Tajiks to exercise power. There are very few Sikh, Hindu and Bahai in the country which do not have much more freedom than Christians, but their advantage is that they are not perceived as being Western and alien.

Afghanistan faces a grim security situation due to the influx of radical Islamic militants in the form of the Islamic State group. The radical Islamic Taliban also seem to be increasing in strength and are present in more regions and provinces than in the last few years.

The political landscape

Competing factions of radical Islamic groups as well as a weak and split government (despite its name “National Unity Government”) do not bear well for the future of the country. The quick consecutive changes in leadership of several radical Islamic groups (due to targeted killings) has not reduced their ability to execute attacks and harm government, national army and citizens.

Warlords representing ethnic factions influence the political scene. Even occasional peace accords with warlords – such as the one with the infamous Hekmatyar in September 2016 - will most likely change nothing for the country’s security. Afghanistan is still the country with the

most landmines in the world, the level of crime is increasing, criminal gangs are active in various regions and kidnappings occur frequently.

The Taliban are once again an increasing threat to stability too. The brief capture of Northern Kunduz, at the end of September 2015, was a major blow to the government as it was the first provincial capital to be re-conquered by the Taliban since 2001. It showed as well that Taliban are not just powerful in their strongholds in the southern province Helmand. Although not all the major bomb attacks in Kabul in May-July 2017 (one alone killing 150 people) were claimed by the Taliban, they are a clear signal that stability and peace remain a far cry for Afghanistan.

Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State have made inroads into the country as well. This even went so far that the Taliban publically warned Islamic State (IS) to stay off their turf [in June 2015](#).⁴ Nangarhar province turned out to be a stronghold for IS, although its actual numbers appear to be relatively small. However, it already poses a serious challenge for national and international security forces and carries out attacks with great brutality. This was acknowledged by US troops dropping its largest ever non-nuclear bomb in 2017 on an IS-hideout, killing at least eighty, many being militants from abroad.

The country's socio-economic landscape

Afghanistan is in an uncomfortable position as it is a land-locked country and, due to decades of civil war, the infrastructure is not only in a very bad shape, but is also limited in capacity. The country cannot currently take advantage of its rich minerals and most likely oil and gas as well as these commodities need foreign investment, which in turn needs stability and predictability. Even China, which is commodity-hungry and willing to take more risks than most other investors, remains cautious. One of the main economic problems Afghanistan faces is that illicit drugs like opium are 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 15% of the equivalent of the country's licit GDP. The Taliban are heavily involved in drug production, estimations are that 70-80% of all drug trafficking gains end up in the Taliban's pockets. 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.

The country is not only war-torn, but also torn between different ethnic groups which are strong in different parts of the country. It seems that all are aiming to secure their own position (whether the majority group, the Pashtuns, or other large groups like Tajik, Hazara, Uzbek, Aiman or Turkmen) and are not interested in the well-being of Afghanistan as a whole. A famous Afghani saying illustrates this: "First my tribe, then my people and then the country". This attitude leaves the country with rough roads ahead, especially given the weakness of national security forces.

⁴ See: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/taliban-warns-islamic-state-to-stay-out-of-afghanistan/2015/06/16/a88bafb8-1436-11e5-8457-4b431bf7ed4c_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.87bef8fd19f8, last accessed 5 November 2017.

The term “civil society” is virtually unknown, so pressure groups caring for social development, women issues, minorities or human rights will do little to influence the political development of the country. Groups supporting the rule of law, participation in the political process or government accountability, are quickly suspected of being agents of the international community, furthering the agenda of the West. These accusations do not only come from the government, but also from society. This mindset makes it easy for any kind of insurgents to mobilize a large number of the population to oppose “foreign occupiers” who are labeled as non-believers. This would seem to apply also to Western non-government organizations working in the country, including the few Christian ones. This is one of the reasons why attacks against aid workers continue. The most recent examples are two Christian women from Germany and Finland, working for Operation Mercy in Kabul, who were killed and abducted respectively in May 2017.

Concluding remarks

Life for most Afghans is a constant balancing act with little hope for improvement. More than 50% of the population is younger than 20 years old and the high population growth only exacerbates the problems. Unemployment, poverty and inflation rates remain very high. Due to the lack of perspectives, many young people get involved in drug-trafficking or join militant groups. Foreign aid will not sustain improvement as long as the problem of rampant corruption is not solved. The strong push by neighboring Pakistan to send back very large numbers of Afghan refugees, adds additional strain on social, health and economic structures.

WWL 2018: Church History and Facts

How many Christians?

Pop 2017	Christians	Chr%
34,169,000	thousands	/

Source: OD estimate for number of Christians

How did Christians get there?

- a) Early history: Christianity may have reached Afghanistan by the 2nd century AD. According to traditions passed on by Eusebius of Caesarea (260-339 AD), the apostles Thomas and Bartholomew brought the gospel to Parthia and Bactria, which includes today’s north-western Afghanistan. The congregations which grew up developed into the Nestorian Church and Afghan cities like Herat, Kandahar and Balkh became bishopric seats. In the 13th century a Christian ruler converted to Islam and became Sultan, which led to a decline of Christianity and was nearly completely extinguished by the reign of Timur in 1405.

b) Later history leading up to the present: In the 17th century, Armenian merchants came to Kabul and in time a small Christian community developed, but this Armenian community was forced to leave the country by 1871. Attempts at building a Protestant church in Kabul came to an end in 1973. Today, Christianity has been pushed underground completely. It is claimed that in the basement of the Italian embassy, there is still a legally recognized church, the only in the country. But it is not publically accessible and therefore only serves expat Christians.

What church networks exist today?⁵

Orthodox	Catholic	Protestant	Independent	Unaffiliated	Double-aff	Evangelical	Renewalist

Source: WCD, May 2017

According to WCD, there are no main denominations in Afghanistan. Open Doors records the presence of individual followers of Christ and small groups of believers, but no organized church, neither expatriate nor indigenous, and prefers not to give an exact number as conversion is a very dangerous decision. There are several congregations of Afghan Christians [abroad](#), as The Guardian reported in 2010.⁶

Religious context (selection)

Christian	Muslim	Hindu	Buddhist	Ethno-religionist	Jewish	Bahai	Atheist & others ⁷
thousands							

Source: Open Doors estimate 2017

According to WCD statistics, more than 99% of the population is Muslim (4/5 of them Sunni) and there are small groups of Hindus, Bahai, Buddhists and Christians in the country. The two main languages are Pashtu and Dari (Farsi dialect). The largest ethnolinguistic groups are Pashtun, Tajik, Hazara, Uzbek, Aimak, Turkmen, Baloch and others. The Afghan constitution mentions 14 different ethnic groups.

⁵ **Orthodox:** Eastern (Chalcedonian), Oriental (Pre-Chalcedonian, Non-Chalcedonian, Monophysite), Nestorian (Assyrian), and non-historical Orthodox. **Roman Catholics:** All Christians in communion with the Church of Rome. **Protestants:** Christians in churches originating in or in communion with the Western world’s 16th-century Protestant Reformation. Includes Anglicans, Lutherans and Baptists (any of whom may be Charismatic) and denominational Pentecostals, but not Independent traditions such as Independent Baptists nor independent Charismatics. **Independents:** Believers who do not identify with the major Christian traditions (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant). **Unaffiliated Christians:** Persons professing publicly to be Christians but who are not affiliated to churches. **Doubly-affiliated Christians:** Persons affiliated to or claimed by 2 denominations at once. **Evangelicals:** Churches, denominations, and individuals who identify themselves as evangelicals by membership in denominations linked to evangelical alliances (e.g., World Evangelical Alliance) or by self-identification in polls. **Renewalists:** Church members involved in Pentecostal/Charismatic renewal movements.

⁶ See: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2010/dec/29/afghanistan-christian-converts>, last accessed 20 April 2018.

⁷ This category includes Atheists, Agnostics and New religionists.

There are many ethnic tensions in Afghanistan, as the Pashtuns are often regarded as being too dominant. Political cooperation is constantly affected by mistrust and the National Unity Government (forged by international powers in 2014) is no exception.

Notes on the current situation

Afghanistan has always been a playing field for its bigger neighbors, but England, Pakistan, India, Iran, Russia and China all have interests at stake, as well as the countries empowering the international forces, first and foremost the United States. Those interests not only deal with debated borders, illicit drug-trafficking and the spread of violent groups across Afghan borders, but also with a deeper-rooted mistrust against all foreign influence. The government tries to make the best of the situation, looking for additional loans and trying to deal with complex diplomatic issues.

The growing influence of the Islamic State group and the setting-up of the “Islamic State Khorasan Province” have underlined once more that Afghanistan does not lack radical groups which despise every Christian teaching and will not hesitate to attack everything perceived as Christian. Expatriate Christians remain a target of Islamic militants, even if they do not testify about their Christian faith explicitly but are employed by charities motivated by Christian faith. The most recent examples are two Christian women from Germany and Finland, working for Operation Mercy in Kabul, who were killed and abducted respectively in May 2017.

WWL 2018: Short & Simple Persecution Profile

Reporting period: 1 November 2016 - 31 October 2017

WWL 2018 Points: 93 / Position: 2

WWL 2017 Points: 89 / Position: 3

WWL 2016 Points: 88 / Position: 4

Where persecution comes from

Since Afghanistan is per constitution an Islamic state, all other religions are seen as alien to the country and consequently, government officials have been hostile towards any signs of Christianity. This is even truer for ethnic group leaders, religious leaders and citizens. The tribal community in Afghanistan is much stronger and more important than the state. Anyone changing his or her religion to Christianity is seen as leaving this community. In most cases, conversion brings shame for the family, and family members will do all in their power to bring the convert back to Islam or to atone for the shame. Additionally, radical Islamic militants, such as the Islamic State group (new on the scene) or the Taliban, are expanding their control and rule over more than 40% of the country already.

How Christians are suffering

All Christians in Afghanistan are converts and are not able to live their faith openly, neither alone nor in community and have to stay in utmost hiding. There is a small expatriate Christian community in Kabul, mostly comprised of diplomats and members of the international forces, but if they are able to meet, they are doing so in the highly secured diplomatic zone. As this has nothing to do with the rest of Afghanistan, the expatriate community is not considered for WWL scoring.

In many cases, converts are simply considered insane, for no-one in his right mind would even think of leaving Islam. If they cannot be convinced to return to their old faith, they may end up in a psychiatric hospital, beaten up by neighbors and friends and/or their houses destroyed. Depending on the family, they might even be killed. On the other hand, when families witness the life-changing power of Christ in a known Christian's life, it can also happen that the whole family converts. In these cases, this must be kept absolutely secret. Due to the extreme pressure, some Christians have to leave the country.

Examples

Any acts of worship put Christian believers at risk. As all religious 'changes' are noticed and reported, this often means families have to relocate as neighborhood pressure and the influence of the Taliban or Islamic State group is strong. If found even exploring any faith other than Islam (and especially if suspected of having converted), the penalty can be death and it depends on the family situation what the consequences are. Christians will be employed as long as it is believed they are Afghan Muslims. If it is discovered that they are even only exploring Christianity, e.g. by checking the internet, immediate action is taken trying to reindoctrinate them till they and their community of believers comply. This can mean torture.

There are reports of converts being killed, but for security reasons no details can be published. The level of violence against Christians is illustrated, however, by the killing of a Christian aid worker who lived in Afghanistan for 13 years and originated from Germany. She was [targeted and killed](https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2017/05/german-aid-worker-killed-finnish-woman-kidnapped-kabul/)⁸ in Kabul on 20 May 2017. The Afghan guarding the compound was beheaded.

⁸ <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2017/05/german-aid-worker-killed-finnish-woman-kidnapped-kabul/>

WWL 2018: Persecution Dynamics

Reporting period: 1 November 2016 - 31 October 2017

WWL 2018 Points: 93 / Position: 2

WWL 2017 Points: 89 / Position: 3

WWL 2016 Points: 88 / Position: 4

Contents

Position on World Watch List (WWL)..... 9

Persecution engines 9

Drivers of persecution..... 11

Christian communities and how they are affected 13

Pressure in the 5 spheres of life and violence 14

Gender profile of persecution..... 16

Future outlook..... 16

Policy considerations..... 18

Position on World Watch List (WWL)

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 in Afghanistan ⁹	Level of influence
Islamic oppression	Very strong
Religious nationalism	Not at all
Ethnic antagonism	Very strong
Denominational protectionism	Not at all

⁹ 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	Very strong

Islamic oppression (Very strong):

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](#).¹⁰ 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](#))¹¹, while an estimated 600,000 refugees have been sent back from neighboring Pakistan, putting the country under [enormous pressure](#).¹²

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](#)¹³ 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.

Ethnic antagonism (Very strong):

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.

¹⁰ 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.

¹¹ 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.

¹² 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.

¹³ See: <https://asiafoundation.org/publication/afghanistan-2017-survey-afghan-people/>, last accessed 27 November 2017.

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 (Very strong):

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](#)¹⁴ 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	Level of influence
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

¹⁴ 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.

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,¹⁵ 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”.¹⁶ 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 dangerous development, it has to be asked whether IS really is the [most dangerous threat](#)¹⁷ 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](#)¹⁸, 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](#)¹⁹, even before general elections can take place in 2018. [Internal power struggles](#)²⁰ 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.

¹⁵ Some Taliban units have switched allegiance to the Islamic State group.

¹⁶ Ancient Khorasan included parts of Iran and Pakistan as well.

¹⁷ See: <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/mother-of-all-bombs-dropped-on-iskp-assessing-the-aftermath/>, 15 April 2017, last accessed 24 August 2017.

¹⁸ See: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-taliban-analysis-idUSKBN17P0RJ?feedType=RSS&feedName=worldNews>, 23 April 2017, last accessed 24 August 2017.

¹⁹ See: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/285-afghanistan-future-national-unity-government>, 10 April 2017, last accessed 24 August 2017.

²⁰ See: <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/the-ankara-coalition-opposition-from-within-the-government/>, 25 July 2017, last accessed 24 August 2017.

With [over a hundred people killed](#)²¹ 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 up-hill 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](#)²², 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](#).²³ 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](#)²⁴ provide financial backing for some of those groups 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

²¹ See: <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/a-black-week-in-kabul-terror-and-protests/>, 4 June 2017, last accessed 24 August 2017.

²² 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.

²³ See: https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/unama_report_on_attacks_against_places_of_worship_7nov2017_0.pdf, last accessed 27 November 2017.

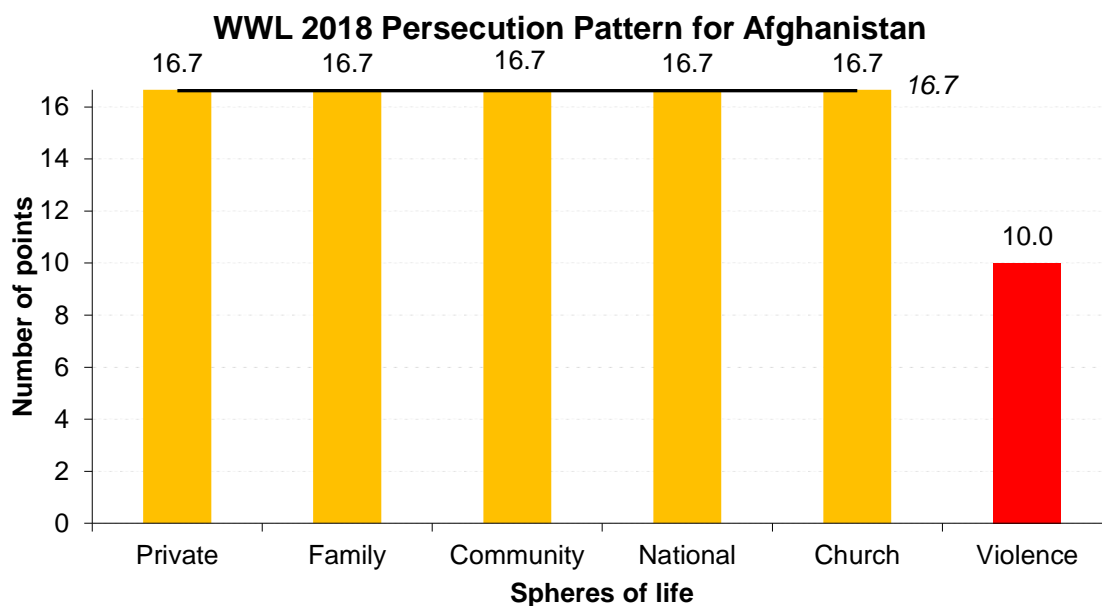
²⁴ See: <https://www.globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/afghanistan/war-treasury-people-afghanistan-lapis-lazuli-and-battle-mineral-wealth/>, last accessed 29 November 2016.

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 for Afghanistan 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 2018 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 [killing²⁵](#) 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 currently 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:

²⁵ See: <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/05/21/world/kabul-afghanistan-aid-worker-attack-abduction/index.html>, last accessed 6 December 2017.

- 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](#)²⁶ “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.
- 2) Economic reasons: Although Afghanistan’s state revenue saw a [strong growth](#)²⁷, 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](#)²⁸ 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](#)²⁹ 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.

²⁶ 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.

²⁷ 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.

²⁸ 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.

²⁹ 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.

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 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.

WWR in-depth reports

There are currently no in-depth reports on Afghanistan available at:
<http://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/> (password: freedom).

Open Doors article(s) from the region

There are currently no Open Doors articles on Afghanistan available at:
<http://opendoorsanalytical.org/articles/> (password freedom).

World Watch Monitor news articles

Up-to-date articles are available at:
<https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/countries/afghanistan/>

- [Afghan convert ‘could face death’ if deported from Switzerland](#)
18 January 2018
An Afghan convert could face persecution, imprisonment and even death if the Swiss government succeeds in deporting him, the religious liberty advocacy group ADF International has said.
- [EU ‘wilfully blind’ to risks of deporting Christian converts back to Afghanistan](#)
6 October 2017
European countries and the EU are “wilfully blind” to the risks facing Afghans who fail in their asylum claims and are sent home, according to a new report by Amnesty International.
- [Afghanistan: kidnapped Finnish woman freed after four months](#)
14 September 2017
A Finnish aid worker held hostage for nearly four months in Afghanistan has been freed today (14 September). She had been kidnapped from an international guesthouse in Kabul, run by her employer.

- [German aid worker killed, Finnish woman ‘kidnapped’ in Kabul](#)
 22 May 2017
 A German woman and her Afghan guard were killed, and a Finnish woman apparently kidnapped, at an international guesthouse run by a Swedish-based charity in Afghanistan’s capital Kabul late on Saturday evening, 20 May.
- [Iranian and Afghan Christian converts face deportation from Germany after ‘clueless’ questioning](#)
 16 January 2017
 Germany’s Ministry for Immigration and Refugees (BAMF) is rejecting many applications for asylum from Iranian and Afghan converts from Islam to Christianity, following “kangaroo court”-style hearings, according to a Berlin pastor.

Recent country developments

Up-to-date articles are available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=Afghanistan> (password: freedom).

- [Afghanistan: No April fool – Election date finally announced](#)
 16 April 2018
 As Radio Free Europe reported on 1 April 2018, 20 October 2018 is the date finally set by the authorities for the next round of legislative and local elections.
- [Afghanistan: Taliban to be recognized as a political party?](#)
 28 March 2018
 In an effort to advance peace in the severely war-torn country, President Ghani has extended an offer to recognize the Taliban as a political party.
- [Afghanistan: Ethnicity remains a hot topic of debate](#)
 27 March 2018
 The time and effort it is taking to introduce an electronic ID card for Afghan citizens illustrates the deep ethnic and religious rifts dividing Afghanistan.
- [Afghanistan: Good news at last?](#)
 8 March 2018
 Afghan Analysts Network reported on 13 February 2018 that the figure for civilian casualties in Afghanistan dropped by 9% in 2017 compared to 2016.
- [Afghanistan: 2018 already seems worse than ever](#)
 12 February 2018
 Afghanistan has witnessed one of its worst months in terms of security – again. In the period 20-29 January 2018, five high profile attacks were carried out.

- [Afghanistan: Worrying signs ahead of elections in 2018](#)
28 October 2017
With parliamentary elections planned for June 2018, a new opposition group “Mehwar-e Mardom-e Afghanistan” has been forged.
- [Afghanistan: Rift in government finally official](#)
14 August 2017
According to Radio Free Europe reporting on 18 July 2017, Vice-President Dostum has been barred from returning to Afghanistan after “medical treatment” in Turkey.
- [Afghanistan: The guessing game continues](#)
25 July 2017
The US Department of Defense has announced that Abu Sayed, the head of Islamic State in Afghanistan, has been killed in a strike on the group’s headquarters in Kunar.
- [Afghanistan: Week of violence rocks the country](#)
12 June 2017
Over a hundred people were killed in suicide attacks at the end of May and beginning of June 2017.
- [Afghanistan: A land of continuing attacks and refugee pressure](#)
5 June 2017
On 21 May 2017, CNN reported the killing of a German and the abduction of a Finnish citizen, both women working for the Swedish aid agency Operation Mercy in Kabul.
- [Afghanistan: Worse than ever?](#)
29 April 2017
US forces used the largest conventional bomb ever dropped in an attack on Islamic State (IS) forces in Nangahar Province on 13 April 2017.
- [Pakistan/Afghanistan: Government accused of committing refoulement with UN assistance](#)
28 February 2017
Refoulement is a term in international law denoting the forced repatriation of refugees to a country where they face persecution, torture or a risk to their lives. According to Human Rights Watch, refugees in Pakistan are being offered UN cash grants for those deciding “on their own accord” to go back to Afghanistan.
- [Afghanistan: Massive social challenges](#)
21 November 2016
According to In Depth News (IDN) reporting on 23 October 2016, the UN Office on Drugs and Crime has expressed concern over a 43% increase in Afghanistan’s opium production.

[Return to top of document](#)