



## TURKMENISTAN: Country Dossier

May 2018



**Open Doors**

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

Open Doors International / World Watch Research Unit

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# 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 Countries<sup>1</sup>

		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

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

# TURKMENISTAN – Country Dossier (May 2018)

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## Introduction

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

TURKMENISTAN		
World Watch List	Score	Rank
WWL 2018	68	19
WWL 2017	67	19
WWL 2016	66	19
WWL 2015	63	20
WWL 2014	62	20

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

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

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

# WWL 2018: Keys to understanding TURKMENISTAN

## Link for general background information:

BBC country profile: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-16094646>

## Recent country history

After 69 years as part of the Soviet Union Turkmenistan declared its independence on 27 October 1991. Until the death of former President Saparmurat Niyazov in 2006, the country had been in the tight grip of his quasi-religious personality cult, based on his book, called “Ruhnama”. This book and its philosophy dominated public life and were taught in schools and universities. Perhaps the climax of this reverence was the construction of a huge tower in the capital Ashgabat which was topped by a golden, rotating statue of Mr. President. The statue was always facing the sun. The official explanation was that the sun followed the statue, not the other way round. It is hardly surprising that observers have referred to the country as the North Korea of Central Asia.

Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov took office after President Niyazov’s death in December 2006 and cancelled some of his decisions, e.g. to re-name months and days according to Turkmen heroes, but he had to move carefully in deposing his predecessor who had been revered almost like a god. The compulsory teaching of Ruhnama in the country’s education system was gradually reduced. The golden statue was moved to the outskirts of Ashgabat.

It did not take long before Berdymukhamedov developed his own personality cult around the honorary title “Arkadag” (Protector). After Berdymukhamedov’s re-election in 2012, a new era was announced: the “Era of Supreme Happiness.” The regime decided to tear down thousands of homes and rebuild the capital Ashgabat as a white marbled city. On 25 May 2015 the authorities in Turkmenistan unveiled a giant statue of President Berdymukhamedov on horseback, holding a dove - everything covered with a layer of 24-carat gold. In September 2016 constitutional amendments were made to allow the president to run in future presidential elections regardless of his age.

## The religious landscape

According to the World Christian Database (WCD, May 2017) 95.7% of the population is Muslim – predominantly Sunni. However, it would be wrong to call Turkmenistan a Muslim country. 70 years of atheism during the Soviet era have left a deep influence. The government (the heirs of the atheist Soviets) is staunchly secular and has Islam firmly under control. Muslim citizens follow basic Islamic culture rather than strict Muslim teachings.

According to WCD, the second largest religious category is non-religious/atheist. This is most evident in the capital Ashgabat and other major cities. This is the result of 70 years of forced atheism by the government of the USSR from 1917 to 1991.

Christians are a very small group making up 1.3% of the population. The overwhelming majority of them are Russian Orthodox (i.e. ethnic Russians). As in many other countries in Central Asia the Christian community is having to face the emigration of many Russians. This is not compensated by the increase in the number of converts to Christianity, who currently number about 1,000. One of the major problems for Christians in Turkmenistan (and the other countries in Central Asia) is the fact that there is much division and little cooperation between the various denominations. Unfortunately this makes the Church very weak and it plays into the hands of the government.

There is no freedom of religion in Turkmenistan despite the claims to the contrary in the country's constitution. The dictatorial government of Turkmenistan uses a huge body of state agents (police, secret services, local imams) to closely monitor all religious activities. It has imposed so many restrictions on religious freedom that one can say that this does not exist in Turkmenistan. This is the case for all religions, not only for the Christian faith.

## The political landscape

Turkmenistan is a presidential republic, whereby the President of Turkmenistan is both head of state and head of government. No true opposition parties are allowed. Power is concentrated in the presidency; the judiciary is wholly subservient to the government, with all judges appointed for five-year terms by the president without legislative review.

Turkmenistan is the Central Asian country with the highest level of state control in almost every aspect of life. The US State Department reports that the regime has imposed “laws and policies that restrict religious freedom through registration requirements, strict regulation of the production and dissemination of religious literature, and restrictions on permissible activities of religious groups and individuals.”

Since May 2015, the State Commission on Religious Organizations and Expert Evaluation of Religious Information Resources (SCROEERIR) is responsible for controlling religious affairs. The law states that this commission should help registered religious groups to work with government agencies, explain the law to religious representatives, monitor the activities of religious groups to ensure they are in compliance with the law, assist with translating and publishing religious literature, and promote understanding and tolerance among different religious groups (source: [IRF Turkmenistan report 2015](#)).<sup>4</sup> Each and every request from a religious group needs approval before implementation.

## The socio-economic landscape

The state is in charge of the production sector and it also controls the important export sector. As the country is abundantly rich in resources like oil, natural gas and other raw materials, also in cotton and grain, people heading these industries can make a lot of money. Purchasing and trade monopolies are a means of keeping prices well below the world market, but are also points where corruption enters. At least eight of twelve domestic banks are state-owned and as the state decides which ministerial debts are abolished, banking practice is limited.

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<sup>4</sup> See: <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/256533.pdf>, last accessed November 2017.

Despite the country's potential wealth due to enormous amounts of natural gas and other commodities, only a very small elite benefits from it. The unemployment and the poverty rate remain on a very high level and the considerable growth of GDP – per capita as well as in percentage – has not improved the living conditions of all citizens on an equal basis. The huge drop in the oil price since 2014 has had a rather negative effect on Turkmenistan's economy. The planned reconstruction of the capital Ashgabat had to be delayed.

Turkmenistan has a high level of unemployment. According to the CIA World Factbook the unemployment figures stood at 60% in 2004 and have hardly improved since then. Corruption is endemic on all levels of administration and government. The power groups within the regime have no interest in losing their opportunity of making money.

Thanks to the former Soviet system of education, practically every citizen in Turkmenistan is literate. This means that people who are interested in the Christian message can receive materials in their own language. The restrictions imposed by the government (all materials must be approved and only registered groups may be active) mean that most distribution etc. must be done unofficially.

Turkmenistan has a bad reputation as far as human rights are concerned and its prisons and labor camps are constantly overpopulated. Literally thousands of people are held in appalling conditions. The best known of these is the Seydi labor camp in the desert some 40 kilometers (25 miles) north-west of the city of Turkmenabad near the Amu Darya River and Uzbek border. Every year there are amnesty days when hundreds of prisoners are released.

In general, Christians experience the same problems as all other people in the country and are not especially targeted economically or socially. The only exception to this is the pressure from the social environment (family, local imams, villagers) on Christians with a Muslim background.

## Concluding remarks

Turkmenistan is under the tight control of a dictatorial government which is not under pressure or threat from any side. It is therefore safe to assume that there will be no important change of policy by the current government. For Christians this means that they will continue to live under huge pressure for some time to come.

## WWL 2018: Church History and Facts

### How many Christians?

Pop 2017	Christians	Chr%
5,503,000	69,900	1.3

Source: WCD, May 2017

## How did Christians get there?

The first Christians to enter Central Asia (including Turkmenistan) were Nestorian missionaries in the 4th century. From the 5th century onwards there were great movements of peoples in Asia and Europe and for Turkmenistan this meant the arrival of a Turkic tribe from eastern Asia named Oghuz (the ethnic ancestors of the Turkmen). In the 8th century Islam entered the region, following the tracks of the Silk Road trade route, and Christians disappeared from the country.

In the 16th century Turkmenistan became part of the Uzbek khanates of Khiva and Bukhara which deeply influenced the country's culture and religion.

The current presence of Christians in Turkmenistan dates from the 19th century. In 1867 the Russian Empire expanded its territory into Central Asia during a number of military campaigns, conquering the khanates of Khiva and Bukhara. The regime brought in ethnic Russians, who mostly belonged to the Russian Orthodox Church. During the Second World War, Joseph Stalin ordered the deportation of large numbers of ethnic Germans, Ukrainians, Poles and Koreans to Central Asia. With them, other Christian denominations found their way into Turkmenistan.

## What church networks exist today? <sup>5</sup>

Orthodox	Catholic	Protestant	Independent	Unaffiliated	Double-aff	Evangelical	Renewalist
53,100	250	3,200	10,600	2,800	-	780	3,900

Source: WCD, May 2017

**Communities of expatriate Christians** do not exist according to Open Doors sources.

**The historical Christian communities** are by far the largest group of Christians in Turkmenistan, the biggest denomination being the Russian Orthodox Church. This Russian-speaking church is shrinking due to the emigration of its members. The Roman Catholic Church only has about 250 believers.

**The communities of converts to Christianity** number approximately 1,000. The indigenous church of Turkmenistan is a very young church but growing slowly. These Christians with a Muslim background experience much pressure from family, friends and community (especially in rural areas).

<sup>5</sup> **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.

**The non-traditional Christian communities** number about 16,000 Christians consisting of Baptists, Evangelicals, Pentecostals, Charismatics, Full Gospel and others.

## Religious context (selection)

Christian	Muslim	Hindu	Buddhist	Ethno-religionist	Jewish	Bahai	Atheist & others <sup>6</sup>
69,900	5,268,000	-	760	900	3,300	1,200	158,870

Source: WCD, May 2017

According to the [2012 census](#)<sup>7</sup> Turkmens form about 85.6% of the population of Turkmenistan, while Uzbeks are 5.7%, Russians 5.1%, Azeris 1.2%, and 3.5% others. Most Christians belong to ethnic minorities - mainly Russian. Except for the indigenous church, the overall number of Christians in Turkmenistan is hardly growing at all. One of the major problems for Christians in Turkmenistan (and the other countries in Central Asia) is the fact that there is much division and little cooperation between the various denominations. Unfortunately this weakens the Church and plays into the hands of the government.

## Notes on the current situation

The government of Turkmenistan is one of the most restrictive in Central Asia. There is no freedom of the press, no freedom of religion, hardly any freedom to travel abroad, and increasing restrictions on import of goods from abroad. The country has its own system of prisons and labor camps that are constantly overcrowded. For Christians it means there is constant monitoring by state agents. Forum 18 published its [Religious Freedom Survey January 2017](#) on 6 January 2017.<sup>8</sup> The following points are just a small selection of the violations of freedom of religion or belief in Turkmenistan identified by Forum 18:

- the passing of laws flagrantly violating the regime's international human rights obligations;
- a ban on all exercise of freedom of religion and belief without state permission;
- arbitrary denials of legal status to those communities which choose to seek it;
- secret police informer recruitment inside belief communities;
- lack of fair trials and due legal process;
- coercion by officials against non-Muslims to attempt to force them to convert to Islam;
- severe restrictions on religious education, including banning women from studying academic theology in the country;
- almost no contact with foreign co-believers permitted;
- censorship of religious literature and other material.

<sup>6</sup> This category includes Atheists, Agnostics and New religionists.

<sup>7</sup> See: <https://en.hronikatm.com/2015/02/the-results-of-census-in-turkmenistan/>, last accessed November 2017.

<sup>8</sup> See: [http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2244](http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2244), last accessed November 2017.



## WWL 2018: Short & Simple Persecution Profile

**Reporting period:** 1 November 2016 - 31 October 2017

**WWL 2018 Points: 68 / Position: 19**

WWL 2017 Points: 67 / Position: 19

WWL 2016 Points: 66 / Position: 19

### Where persecution comes from

There are two main sources of persecution for Christians in Turkmenistan - the State and the Muslim environment. State persecution comes in the form of police, secret services and local authorities monitoring religious activities and regularly attending church services. State authorities often raid non-registered churches. The general Islamic culture makes life for converts to Christianity particularly difficult.

### How Christians are suffering

Even Russian Orthodox and Armenian Apostolic churches may experience Sunday services being monitored. The printing or importing of Christian materials is restricted. Christians from a Muslim background bear the brunt of the persecution both at the hands of the state and from family, friends and community. Where churches have not been registered, Christians suffer repeatedly from police raids, threats, arrests and fines.

After Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan is the most repressive Central Asian state for religious minorities. Given the increased nationalism and the “spiritual guidance” the new president is supposed to be giving the country (like his predecessor Niyazov with his Rukhnama teachings), the pressure on Christians will most likely remain at a very high level but with very low levels of violence.

### Examples

- On 12 April 2016 a new law on religion was introduced in Turkmenistan which places tighter control on Christian church life.<sup>9</sup>
- Families of converts, the local Muslim community, and the authorities interfere with and often hinder church activities.
- Beatings occur every time police interrogate Christians. Arrested Muslims and Jehovah’s Witnesses receive similar severe treatment.

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<sup>9</sup> See: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2017/05/turkmenistans-secret-additions-already-restrictive-religion-law/>, last accessed November 2017.

# WWL 2018: Persecution Dynamics

**Reporting period:** 1 November 2016 - 31 October 2017

**WWL 2018 Points: 68 / Position: 19**

WWL 2017 Points: 67 / Position: 19

WWL 2016 Points: 66 / Position: 19

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## Position on World Watch List (WWL)

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](#)<sup>10</sup> 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.

<sup>10</sup> See: [http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2320](http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2320), last accessed 12 December 2017.

## Persecution engines

Persecution engines in Turkmenistan <sup>11</sup>	Level of influence
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. 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	Level of influence
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

<sup>11</sup> 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.

*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

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.<sup>12</sup>

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,

<sup>12</sup> See: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2017/05/turkmenistans-secret-additions-already-restrictive-religion-law/>, last accessed November 2017.

but they are conducted unhindered and members can meet. Printing or importing Christian materials is restricted.

#### Communities of converts to Christianity:

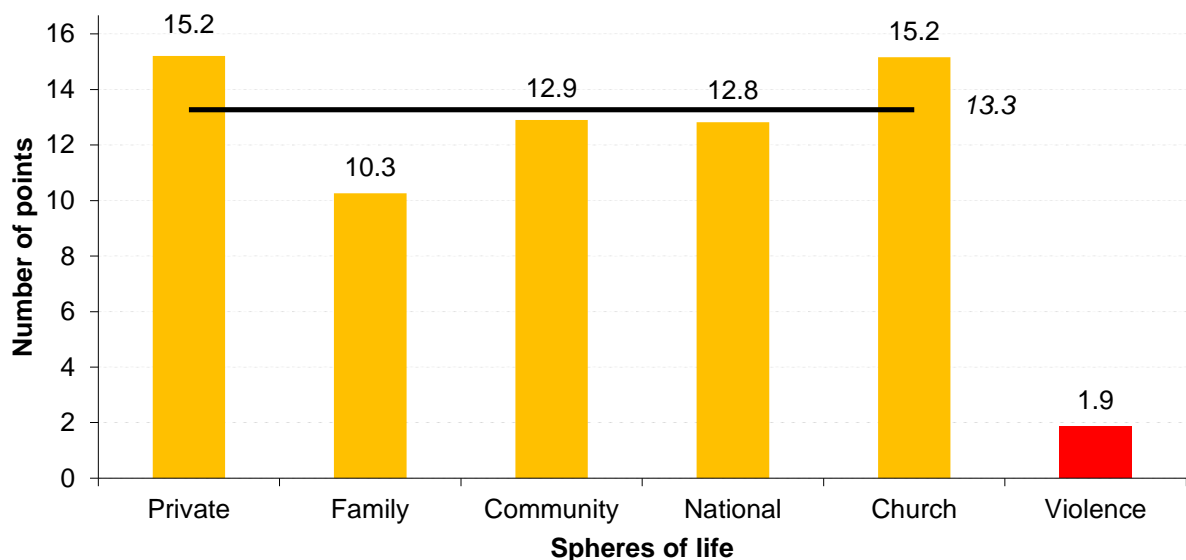
Christian converts from a Muslim background bear the brunt of persecution in Turkmenistan. Apart from the state, they are also under strong pressure from family, friends and community. And for them the latter is by far the more powerful because it dominates their everyday life.

#### Non-traditional Christian communities:

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 maximum score for each block is 16.7)

The WWL 2018 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.



## WWR in-depth reports

All in-depth reports are available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/> (password: freedom).

- Central Asia – The State and Islam – 2016  
June 2016  
This report offers a broad regional and historic overview and a brief synopsis of the situation in each of the five nations in Central Asia. It concludes with a regional summary of the effect on Christians and threats for the future.
- Central Asia/Caucasus – Growing Islamic Extremism – Situation and Outlook – reissued 2015  
Re-issued 2015  
This report offers a study of Islamism in the Central Asian region through three-dimensional (macro, meso and micro) lenses on different levels – (1) history; (2) politics, security and socio-economic factors; and (3) culture and religion.

## Open Doors article(s) from the region

There are currently no Open Doors articles on Turkmenistan 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/turkmenistan/>

- Evangelical churches in Turkmenistan want official registration  
26 January 2018  
Six Evangelical churches in Turkmenistan have submitted a letter to President Gurbanguly Berdimukhamedov, asking to be allowed to register as official religious communities.
- Turkmenistan says religious communities that don't re-register don't exist  
10 October 2017  
Eighteen months after Turkmenistan introduced a law requiring religious communities to re-register with the authorities, only two have done so – other applications have been rejected by the government because of “errors”.

- [Turkmenistan repressing religious freedom through ‘fines, raids and torture’](#)  
4 October 2017  
The UN has called on Turkmenistan to “halt all violations, bring laws into line with international human rights commitments and investigate all acts of undue interference with the freedom of religion of religious communities”.
- [Silence on human rights ‘deafening’ as Turkmenistan hosts Asian Games](#)  
15 September 2017  
The Olympic Council of Asia (OCA) – and by virtue so too the International Olympic Committee – has come under fierce criticism for allowing Turkmenistan to stage the fifth Asian Indoor and Martial Arts Games.
- [Turkmenistan’s secret additions to already restrictive Religion Law](#)  
18 May 2017  
The most significant change is the need for all religious groups to re-register by providing the full names, addresses and dates of birth of at least 50 members. (It used to be five.)
- [Turkmenistan President’s reelection ‘guaranteed’](#)  
15 February 2017  
President Berdymukhamedov secured a third term in office this week by winning a landslide election victory. In September last year, he amended the country’s constitution to allow him to serve for as long as he likes – scrapping the rule that a President must stand down at the age of 70 – and extended Presidential terms from five to seven years.

## Recent country developments

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

- [Turkmenistan: President’s son to ‘learn the ropes’](#)  
8 May 2018  
Turkmenistan’s authoritarian president has appointed his son to a senior post in the Central Asian state’s Foreign Ministry.
- [Turkmenistan: President re-elected with huge majority](#)  
2 March 2017  
According to the Central Election Commission, President Berdymukhamedov won 97.69% of the vote with a turnout of 97.27%.

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