



## YEMEN: Country Dossier

April 2018



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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.

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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.

YEMEN		
World Watch List	Score	Rank
WWL 2018	85	9
WWL 2017	85	9
WWL 2016	78	11
WWL 2015	73	14
WWL 2014	74	10

<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 YEMEN

## Link for general background information:

BBC country profile: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-14704852>

## Recent country history

Yemen is a relatively ‘young’ country. Clan-based North Yemen and Communist South Yemen merged in 1990 after years of armed conflict. Still today, the separatist movement in the South remains strong and is fighting for independence. In the northern part of the country, there has been much tribal violence and fighting in recent years. The Houthi clan claims to be fighting government oppression and wants the restoration of Shia rule in the north of Yemen, which is mainly Sunni. Since the ousting of former President Ali Abdullah Saleh in 2012, Yemen has seen political turmoil and sporadic violence. In the power vacuum, militants and rebels – including groups affiliated with al-Qaeda and Islamic State (IS) - are fighting to gain control of territory.

In September 2014, protests by Houthis degenerated into fighting with rival forces such as Islah, Yemen’s main Sunni radical Islamic party. In March 2015, after taking over Yemen’s capital airport in Sanaa, crucial government ministries and northern areas of the country, the Shiite Houthis forced President Abd Rabbuh Mansour Hadi and his government into exile in Saudi Arabia. In July 2015, forces loyal to the government and southern militias regained control of Aden, backed by the troops and airstrikes of the Sunni Saudi-led coalition, which started in March 2015. Saudi Arabia started this military operation against the Houthis, partly in an attempt to counter Iran’s influence in its ‘backyard’. In September 2015 President Hadi returned to Aden.

The CIA Factbook states: “Ground fighting between H[o]uthi-aligned forces and resistance groups backed by the Saudi-led coalition continued through 2016. The UN brokered a cessation of hostilities (COH) that reduced airstrikes and fighting across the country for several months in mid-2016. Meanwhile, UN-backed peace talks in Kuwait broke down in August 2016 without agreement. The conflict escalated, and subsequent attempts to declare a COH or resume peace talks have failed. The H[o]uthis and Salih’s political party announced a Supreme Political Council in August 2016 and a National Salvation Government, including a prime minister and several dozen cabinet members, in November 2016, to govern in Sanaa and further challenge the legitimacy of Hadi’s government.”<sup>4</sup>

## The religious landscape

Accelerated by the civil war, the influence of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) appears to be growing further as it expands its territorial control in southern Yemen. IS-affiliated groups are also present in the war torn country and have started attacking both Shiite and government related targets since March 2015.

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<sup>4</sup> [Yemen Country Profile](#), CIA World Factbook, accessed 20th June 2017.

Buildings where Christians or expatriates from Christian countries were operating have also been targeted. In Aden, south Yemen, a Catholic care home for the elderly and disabled was attacked on 4 March 2016. The attackers killed 16 people. Four of them were Missionary Sisters of Charity, the Catholic community founded by Mother Teresa. Indian priest Father Tom Uzhunnalil was abducted<sup>5</sup> by the assailants, who according to Yemeni authorities, are connected to IS.

## The political landscape

As stated in the BBC country profile: “Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi came to power in 2012, after then-President Ali Abdallah Saleh stepped down in a bid to end civil unrest. He resigned in January 2015 and fled the country after Houthis took over the capital, Sanaa. He is still supported by Saudi Arabia and loyalist forces willing to fight the Houthi rebels. He has set up a temporary capital in the city of Aden. Yemen is currently in a state of political limbo. The Houthis claim the parliament has been dissolved and replaced by a transitional revolutionary council, headed by Mohammed Ali al-Houthi. But the UN, US and Gulf Co-operation Council refuse to recognize the Houthis' rule.”<sup>6</sup>

## The socio-economic landscape

As stated by the Economist Intelligence Unit: “Pro-government forces, backed by a Saudi-led coalition, remain in conflict with the rebel Houthis and their ally, former president, Ali Abdullah Saleh. There is no sign of an imminent peace deal, however, rapidly depleting economic resources and military pressure are likely to force the Houthis toward a deal by end-2017. Jihadi groups will remain a threat throughout 2017-21. Meanwhile, despite a small restart to oil exports, the economy will remain in crisis, causing a humanitarian disaster.”<sup>7</sup>

There is rampant unemployment and 80% of the population is depending on humanitarian aid. Prices for commodities like water and flour have surged. In besieged cities the price increase has been 5000%. Supplies of electricity and water have discontinued in most areas. Even if the war stops, Yemen faces long-term challenges, including declining water resources, high unemployment, and a high population growth rate. Within the next two decades, Sanaa could run dry. The cultivation of the country's popular drug *qat* is mainly to blame for the increasing shortage of water. One third of Yemen's population is malnourished and even before the war more than 45% lived below the official poverty line.

Throughout Yemen, tribal society remains very strong, and the government is a secondary institution to the traditional ways of tribal governance. The government is not likely to intervene in intertribal conflicts, even if tribes are physically harming or imprisoning members. Tribal law and custom prohibit members of the tribe from leaving the tribe or, in the case of women, marrying out of the tribe, especially to a Christian. The punishment for this would often be death or banishment. “Similarly, Islam is an overarching identity of all of the tribes in

<sup>5</sup> In July 2017 reports came through that he was still alive: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2017/07/church-relieved-as-yemen-confirms-kidnapped-indian-priest-is-alive/>, last accessed 31 July 2017.

<sup>6</sup> [Yemen Country Profile](#), BBC, accessed 20 June 2017.

<sup>7</sup> [Yemen Country Profile](#), the Economist Intelligence Unit, accessed 20 June 2017.

Yemen, and it is the tribe that often delivers retributive ‘justice’ for those who may seek to leave Islam”.<sup>8</sup>

## Concluding remarks

The war in Yemen has led to high levels of violence and lawlessness, a situation which is liable to increase the oppression of minorities, including Christians.

The Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) does not foresee the conclusion of a peace deal in the near future, although the depletion of economic resources and the military pressure could force the Houthi’s to a deal by the end of 2017. Meanwhile the poorest country of the Middle East finds itself in the middle of a devastating humanitarian catastrophe. The country’s humanitarian and economical condition is so bad that it will take years to ever recover. Highly dependent on foreign aid, the country is very vulnerable to external economic factors such as a drop in oil prices affecting financial support for reconstruction from Gulf allies.<sup>9</sup>

EIU analysts expect Jihadi groups to “remain a threat throughout 2017-21”.<sup>10</sup> Since radical Islamic groups are an important driver of the main persecution engine *Islamic oppression* in Yemen, this does not bode well for the religious freedom of Yemen’s religious minorities, notably its Christians. The situation is particularly delicate as the majority of the Christian community consists of indigenous Christians from a Muslim background. On the other hand, amidst the insecurity of war, it is reported that more Muslims are turning to Christ than ever before.

## WWL 2018: Church History and Facts

Source: WCD, May 2017

### How many Christians?

Pop 2017	Christians	Chr%
28,120,000	A few thousand	/

Source: Open Doors estimate for number of Christians 2017

### How did Christians get there?

Centuries before the advent of Islam, the Arabian Peninsula had considerable numbers of Jews and synagogues, Christians (probably mostly Nestorians) and church buildings. Even today, there are ruins of a church – presumably Nestorian - near Jubail in the eastern part of the peninsula. It dates from the 4th century and is said to be the world’s oldest known church.

<sup>8</sup> ODI internal document: Jacob Zenn, May 2014.

<sup>9</sup> Yemen Country Risk report, BMI Research group, accessed 20 June 2017.

<sup>10</sup> Yemen Country Profile, the Economist Intelligence Unit, accessed 20 June 2017.

There are different traditions about how Christianity came to the Arabian Peninsula. According to one tradition, a merchant from Najran (on the southern tip of Saudi Arabia) converted to Christianity during one of his trips to modern day Iraq at the beginning of the 5th century. Together with his family he then formed a house-church. Another tradition suggests that an envoy of the Roman emperor Constantius preached the Christian faith to the Himyarite king of South Arabia who as a result converted. Both traditions say that churches were built particularly – but not exclusively - in South Arabia, which includes modern day Yemen, where most Christians appeared to settle. An important moment in the history of Christianity in the Arabian Peninsula was the massacre of over 200 Christians in Najran (which had become the first Christian city) by Yusuf King of the Himyarites after they refused to convert to Judaism. After the arrival of Nestorianism, Christianity continued to grow and even flourished in the 5th century. For hundreds of years, Christian merchants and tribes were living in and travelling through the vast plains of the Arabian Peninsula.

This all changed with the conquest of Islam (7th -10th century), when Jews and Christians either converted to Islam voluntarily or under duress, and many others were expelled.

Over the next centuries<sup>11</sup> the Arabian Peninsula became overwhelmingly Islamic and Christianity lost significance. For 13 centuries the historical role of Christianity in the region was forgotten and it was hard to imagine that any other religion could coexist with Islam in its birthplace. This changed in the 19th century after Britain made a series of treaties and set up a protectorate in the eastern part of the Arabian Peninsula. Christians started to enter Oman, Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait and the UAE, and with the arrival of these expatriate workers, the first churches began to appear (with the exception of Saudi Arabia). To secure access to their colony India, the British set up a protectorate area around the southern port of Aden in the 19th century. At the end of that century, the first Western missionary, a Scott, arrived in Yemen. In the following years, a medical ministry was set up which also opened the way for communicating the Gospel.

In the rest of the Arabian Peninsula too churches have played an important role in providing medical care and schools, especially in the pre-petroleum era. The oil boom in the 1970s led to an enormous expansion of local development, infrastructure and labor force, with more foreign workers arriving from Asia, Africa, other parts of the Middle East and the West. Taken altogether, there are now approximately more than 15 million foreign workers in the Gulf, of whom more than 3.5 million are Christians. However, due to the civil war hardly any Western expatriates are left in Yemen.

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<sup>11</sup> Information taken from '[Christianity's claim in the birthplace of Islam](#)', Stratfor, 23 April 2016.

## What church networks exist today?<sup>12</sup>

Orthodox	Catholic	Protestant	Independent	Unaffiliated	Double-aff	Evangelical	Renewalist
-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

There are three official church buildings (two Roman Catholic and one Anglican) which are located in Aden in the far south. Due to the current civil war, these are damaged and not in use, but they had previously served the several thousand expatriate Christians (mostly from South East Asia, the West and Arabic countries) and refugees (mainly Ethiopian) living in the country. Apart from these official churches no church buildings are allowed. Nevertheless, discreet weekly services are held in private premises in some cities. Almost all Western expatriates have currently left the country for security reasons.

## Religious context (selection)

Christian	Muslim	Hindu	Buddhist	Ethno-religionist	Jewish	Bahai	Atheist & others <sup>13</sup>
A few thousand	27,870,000	182,000	160	-	24	1,600	27,400

Source: Open Doors estimate for number of Christians and WCD, May 2017

According to WCD statistics over 99% of the population are Muslim - around 65% are Sunni, primarily in the south and east and about 35% are Shiite located mostly in the northwest corner of the country. The current war evolves around the Sunni-Shia conflict, with Saudi Arabia and Iran involved too.

## Notes on the current situation

Saudi's highest Islamic authority, the Grand Mufti, issued a fatwa in 2012 calling for the destruction of all Christian churches in the Arabian Peninsula, which necessarily includes Yemen. After legislators in Kuwait made an effort to pass laws prohibiting the construction of any new churches in 2015, the Grand Mufti repeated this call and said the destruction of all churches in the region was absolutely necessary and required by Islamic law.

<sup>12</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.

<sup>13</sup> This category includes Atheists, Agnostics and New religionists.



## WWL 2018: Short & Simple Persecution Profile

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

**WWL 2018 Points: 85 / Position: 9**

WWL 2017 Points: 85 / Position: 9

WWL 2016 Points: 78 / Position: 11

### Where persecution comes from

The following drivers of persecution are active in Yemen: Government officials at any level from local to national, fanatical movements, extended family, ethnic group leaders and non-Christian religious leaders at any level from local to national. Government officials create and maintain a strict Islamic system that treats all nationals as Muslims. In many areas the Saudi-led military intervention has created power vacuums allowing groups like Islamic State (IS) and al-Qaeda affiliates to expand their operations, and even kill Christians (both Yemeni Christians with a Muslim background and foreigners). Abductions occur as well, often due to a mixture of financial and anti-Christian motives. Converts from Islam to Christianity are mostly suffering from violence and pressure from their extended family but also from tribal leaders, if their new faith is discovered. Local imams are reported to have played a role in instigating attacks on Christians.

### How Christians are suffering

Like all other Yemenis, Christians are suffering from the world's worst humanitarian crisis which is currently taking place in the country. Yemeni Christians continue to be harassed in an unprecedented way and are moving from one war area to another, in search for some safety amidst continual air strikes and the lack of food and water. In this context, their faith makes them additionally vulnerable as emergency relief is mostly distributed through Islamic organizations and local mosques, which are allegedly discriminating against all who are not considered to be pious Muslims. This is a serious threat to the survival of Christians and other non-Muslims. Moreover, government officials continue their efforts to intimidate Christians even amidst the chaotic war situation.

The Church in Yemen is composed mostly of communities of Yemeni Christians with a Muslim background. Migrant Christians, particularly from Africa and also from Asia, remain in the country though most have left due to the devastating war. Migrant Christians face harassment and discrimination from society at community and national level, and even outspoken violence from radical Islamic movements. Christians with a Muslim background face an even higher degree of persecution and effectively need to live their faith in secret. They face persecution from authorities (including detention and interrogation), family, and radical Islamic groups who threaten apostates with death if they do not re-convert. The convert community is reportedly growing despite the insecurity of war.

## Examples

- Private worship has become particularly risky for Christians both in areas controlled by radical Muslims and in areas that were ‘liberated’ by Sunni forces supported by Saudi Arabia and its Western allies. Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and IS operate freely in large parts of the country.
- There were no reports of Christians being killed for their faith in WWL 2018 reporting period. However, the local situation is very chaotic due to the civil war making reporting on violent incidents against Christians difficult. Several times local believers have escaped death by moving to other places.
- One of the greatest threats for Christians is being abducted. Father Tom Uzhunnalil, who was abducted during the attack on a care home for elderly and disabled in Aden in March 2016, was released in September 2017.
- At least 20 believers were mentally or physically abused as a result of their faith and the war.
- At least ten Christian families had to leave their houses and be relocated in the country for faith related reasons. The average family in Yemen being composed of seven persons, this affects at least 70 people.
- Pressure from family members have caused a handful of isolated Yemeni converts to flee the country.

## WWL 2018: Persecution Dynamics

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

**WWL 2018 Points: 85 / Position: 9**

WWL 2017 Points: 85 / Position: 9

WWL 2016 Points: 78 / Position: 11

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## Position on World Watch List (WWL)

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

## Persecution engines

Persecution engines in Yemen <sup>14</sup>	Level of influence
Islamic oppression	Very strong
Religious nationalism	Not at all
Ethnic antagonism	Very strong
Denominational protectionism	Not at all
Communist and post-Communist oppression	Not at all
Secular intolerance	Not at all
Dictatorial paranoia	Weak
Organized corruption and crime	Medium

### Islamic oppression (Very strong):

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

### Ethnic antagonism (Very strong):

Yemeni society is strongly tribal and government authority is often secondary to the traditional tribal governance. Islam is intertwined with ethnic identity. There are many areas in Yemen, where tribal elders enforce law and justice according to their Islam-based traditions regardless

<sup>14</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.

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

#### **Organized corruption and crime (Medium):**

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

### Drivers of persecution

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

The following drivers of persecution are active in Yemen: Government officials at any level from local to national, violent religious groups, extended family, ethnic group leaders and non-

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

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

## Context

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

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

Meanwhile, Yemen is facing a dire humanitarian crisis and development has gone back 100 years in time. Since the start of the war in March 2015, more than 10,000 Yemenis have been killed and 3.1 million people have been displaced<sup>15</sup>. In a United Nations News Center press release published on 28 August 2017, the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) was quoted as follows: “Amid continued violence, water and sanitation systems are collapsing, and more than half of Yemen’s health facilities are out of service.” Almost 15 million people are reportedly cut off from safe water and access to basic healthcare. “In addition, the country remains on the brink of famine, with an estimated 385,000 children suffering from severe acute malnutrition, putting them at heightened risk of acute watery diarrhea and cholera.”<sup>16</sup> Christians are suffering from the effects of war like other Yemeni’s. Several of them had to leave their communities and are now scattered all over the country.

There is also a small group of Bahai believers in Yemen who experience persecution. Radical Muslims consider them to be infidels, others discriminate them because of allegedly having connections with Iran, where the religion was founded in the 19th century. Bahai believers in Yemen are occasionally imprisoned, mistreated, and tortured.<sup>17</sup>

## Christian communities and how they are affected

### Communities of expatriate Christians:

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

### Historical Christian communities:

Indigenous historical Christian communities are not present in Yemen.

### Communities of converts to Christianity:

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

### Non-traditional Christian communities:

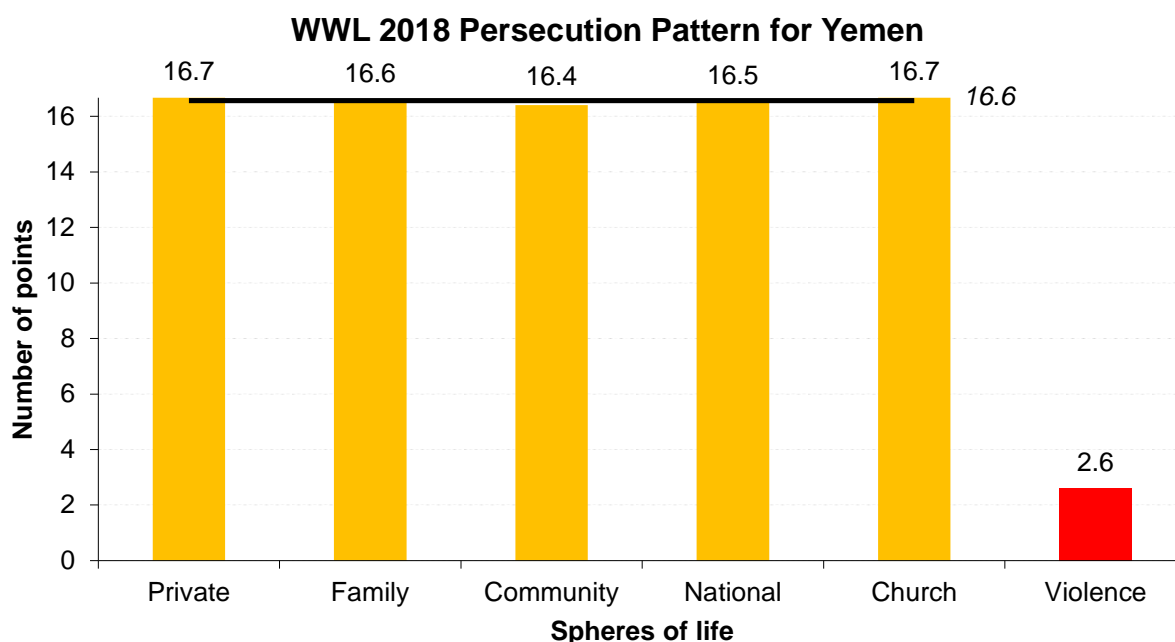
<sup>15</sup> See: <https://www.sfcg.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Pathways-for-Peace-Stability-in-Yemen.pdf> last accessed 6 September 2017.

<sup>16</sup> See: <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=57422#.Wa0-y38UnDc>, last accessed 4 September 2017.

<sup>17</sup> See: <http://www.worldatlas.com/articles/religious-beliefs-in-yemen.html>, last accessed 11 December 2017.

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

## Pressure in the 5 spheres of life and violence



(The maximum score for each block is 16.7)

The WWL 2018 persecution pattern for Yemen shows:

- The average pressure on Christians in Yemen is at an extreme level (16.6), increasing from 15.9 in WWL 2017. The extreme pressure is explained by the war and the departure of most expatriate or migrant Christians. As a result only indigenous Christians have been focused on in the WWL research and they experience the highest levels of persecution.
- Pressure in all *Spheres of life* is at an extreme level. The *Private* and *Church spheres* both scored the maximum possible (16.7), directly followed by the *Family sphere* with 16.6 points. This is typical for a situation in which there are mostly Christians with a Muslim background in a country with *Islamic oppression* as the main persecution engine, leaving no room for any open church activities or private worship.
- The level of violence against Christians decreased from 5.9 in WWL 2017 to 2.6. In the WWL 2018 reporting period, there were no reports of Christians killed for their faith or of Christian buildings being attacked. At least 70 Christians relocated inside the country and one family of converts left the country because of religious persecution. Mental abuse, including death threats, affected at least 20 converts from Islam.
- The overall persecution in Yemen corresponds to the current chaotic and lawless situation of war, in which local Christians are additionally vulnerable.

### Private sphere:

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

**Family sphere:**

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

**Community sphere:**

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

**National sphere:**

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

**Church sphere:**



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

**Violence:**

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

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

## Gender profile of persecution

**Female:**

In a culture where the oppression of women is normal, female Christians with a Muslim background are additionally vulnerable. Tribal law and customs do not allow them to marry a Christian; punishment for disobedience can be death, banishment, or confinement within the home. In a public case reported in local papers, a young woman whose faith in Christ was discovered was committed to an asylum for the mentally ill. Female converts are also likely to be married off to a Muslim if their conversion is known. The local community of converts is reacting to this situation by arranging marriages with other Christians of Muslim background. Female converts may also risk rape or sexual harassment. As such, female converts usually continue to wear the local Muslim dress for their own safety and security. In comparison to men, female seekers and new believers face greater limitations in accessing discipleship training, fellowship with other believers, and opportunities to get baptized —unless they have

a close male relative who can facilitate their participation in these activities. This is because families closely monitor the activities of female members of the household outside the home, whereas men can come and go without giving an account of how their time was spent outside the home.

**Male:**

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

## Future outlook

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

On a political level, the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) does not foresee the conclusion of a peace deal in the short run, especially since the “rebel alliance between the Houthis and former president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, has broken down, resulting in fighting in the capital, Sanaa, and the death of Mr Saleh.”<sup>18</sup> A continued stalemate is expected, especially as the Houthis now control most of Sanaa. Adding to the complexity of the conflict, is the rise of secessionist sentiment in the south which is likely to lead to further conflict. Meanwhile the poorest country of the Middle East finds itself in the middle of a devastating humanitarian catastrophe from which it will take a long time to recover. For now, with the fighting likely to intensify, the humanitarian crisis could get worse.

In a situation of war and anarchy, the persecution engine *Organized corruption and crime* is flourishing, and given the current circumstances this engine is only expected to develop further. EIU analysts expect radical Islamic militants to “remain a threat throughout 2017-21”.<sup>19</sup> Whereas the persecution engine *Ethnic antagonism* has fueled the war in Yemen, the conflict is also likely to force people to rely on their own tribes even more, which as a result increases the pressure on and monitoring of Christians. Nationwide, sectarian and tribal divides are deepening which are an important barrier to peace and stability.

<sup>18</sup> See: <http://country.eiu.com/Default.aspx?country=Yemen>, last accessed 11 December 2017

<sup>19</sup> See: <http://country.eiu.com/yemen>, last accessed 4 September 2017.

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

## Policy considerations

Open Doors recommends:

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

## WWR in-depth reports

In-depth reports are available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/> (password: freedom). There is currently none available for Yemen.

## Open Doors article(s) from the region

There are currently no Open Doors articles on Yemen 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/yemen/>

- Father Tom releases book about 18 months' captivity in Yemen  
7 February 2018  
The Indian priest who spent 18 months in captivity in Yemen has released an autobiography. Fr. Tom Uzhunnalil, who was freed in September 2017, has titled the book 'By Grace of God'.
- Fr Tom: my faith got me through 18 months' captivity  
14 September 2017  
The Indian missionary priest released this week after 18 months as a hostage in Yemen has said his Christian faith helped him to survive the ordeal. Fr Tom Uzhunnalil, a priest in the Salesian order, met Pope Francis at the Vatican on Wednesday, the day after his release.
- Indian priest released after 18 months' captivity in Yemen  
12 September 2017  
India's Church, government and politicians from across the political landscape have all expressed relief and joy over the release of Salesian Father Tom Uzhunnalil, kidnapped in Yemen in March 2016.
- Church relieved as Yemen confirms kidnapped Indian priest is 'alive'  
14 July 2017  
The Church in India, especially in the southern state of Kerala, is breathing a sign of relief after Yemen confirmed to India's foreign minister that Catholic missionary Father Tom Uzhunnalil, kidnapped in Yemen in March 2016, is "alive".
- As a Christian woman in Yemen, life is about survival  
11 April 2017  
Life in Yemen is not easy for a woman. Especially if you are a woman who has decided to become a Christian. Yemen is a tribal country, where leaving Islam is seen as a betrayal of that tribe, punishable by death.
- Criticised for not securing release of kidnapped priest in Yemen, Indian government says it 'told him not to go'  
9 January 2017  
India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi has come under fire from his political opponents for his failure to secure the release of an Indian Catholic priest kidnapped 10 months ago in Yemen by Islamic extremists.

## Recent country developments

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

- Yemen: Abducted Catholic priest finally released

15 September 2017

Christian Today reported the joyful news that the kidnapped Indian Catholic priest, Tom Uzhunnalil, had been freed from captivity and flown to Oman on 12 September 2017.

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