



DJIBOUTI: Country Dossier

June 2018



OpenDoors

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

Open Doors International / World Watch Research Unit

June 2018 / 2

research@od.org

www.opendoorsanalytical.org

World Watch List 2018

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

WWL 2018 Persecution Watch Countries¹

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

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

DJIBOUTI – Country Dossier (June 2018)

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

Contents

World Watch List 2018.....	1
Introduction	2
WWL 2018: Keys to understanding DJIBOUTI.....	3
WWL 2018: Church History and Facts.....	5
WWL 2018: Short & Simple Persecution Profile	7
WWL 2018: Persecution Dynamics	8
WWR in-depth reports.....	15
Open Doors article(s) from the region.....	15
World Watch Monitor news articles.....	15
Recent country developments.....	15

Introduction

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

DJIBOUTI		
World Watch List	Score	Rank
WWL 2018	56	50
WWL 2017	57	40
WWL 2016	58	28
WWL 2015	60	24
WWL 2014	46	46

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

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

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

WWL 2018: Keys to understanding DJIBOUTI

Link for general background information:

BBC country profile: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-13231761>

Recent country history

Djibouti became independent from France in 1977. After years of civil war (1991-2000), the first free multi-party elections took place in 2003. However, the ruling party has effectively gained control of all levels of power of the state and the country no longer has an electoral democracy. President Guelleh was sworn in on 8 May 2016 following his re-election in April 2016.

Djibouti is a country of contrasts. On the one hand, Djibouti has made considerable progress in developing its port, economy and banking sector, making it attractive for foreign business and military investments. On the other hand, it is likely that Djibouti will continue to face challenges such as serious unemployment, a severe lack of skilled workers, chronic drought and food insecurity, high electricity costs, and young, underdeveloped government institutions. This mix of factors is already leading to poverty and political tension; a need is felt for more inclusive governmental policies, a more equal distribution of revenues across the population, an improved energy infrastructure and a significant decrease of corruption within the ruling elite. In Djibouti, these issues, as seen across many parts of Africa, are compounded by the country having a large youth population, which is particularly affected by the high unemployment. It is expected that the trends described above will lead to a continuation of repressive actions keeping Djibouti society in line with elite interests.

At present Djiboutian society favors democracy, combined with the government's commitment to support moderate Islam and combat radicalism, as a form of protection against the rise of Islamic radicalism in the country. However, widespread interest in a more liberal politics could very well destabilize the current political system. In the past, President Guelleh responded to anti-government civil unrest with a mixture of superficial liberal moves and repressive actions of a rather autocratic nature.

The religious landscape

Djibouti is a Sunni majority country. According to the US State Department, over 90% of the population are Muslim. The Christian presence is divided up into various denominations: Roman Catholics, Protestants, Ethiopian Orthodox, Greek Orthodox, and a small convert community with a Muslim background. The fact that the country is overwhelmingly Sunni majority creates an environment where other religious minorities - including Christians - are often treated unfairly.

The political landscape

Djibouti is deemed an “authoritarian regime” by an international democracy rating group and ranks 145th out of 167 countries examined.⁴ Moreover, Freedom House, a renowned international rights group, considers the nation “not free”, as basic political rights are absent and basic civil freedoms are denied.⁵ Political pluralism is considered absent or severely lacking, effectively creating a level of dictatorship; some formal institutions of democracy may exist but have little substance and elections are not free or fair. The state was ruled by a one-party system from its founding in 1977 until 1992, when a new constitution was brought in to allow for a multi-party system. The state has become increasingly repressive over the years and is intolerant of dissent, leaving the population with little if any influence over their government. Moreover, civil liberties are systematically abused, the media is state-controlled, government criticism is repressed and there is no independent judiciary.

The socio-economic landscape

Djibouti is one of the poorest countries in the world and is ranked near the bottom of the United Nations' Human Development Index.⁶ The nation has very few natural resources and little industry. Its biggest asset is its strategic location on the Gulf of Aden at the southern entrance to the Red Sea. Due to this, Djibouti's economy is based on service activities connected with international maritime trade, which makes up around 80% of the country's GDP. In addition, due to neighboring Ethiopia being landlocked, imports and exports from that country represent 70% of port activity at Djibouti's container terminal. As a result of Ethiopian-Eritrean hostilities, Djibouti became Ethiopia's main point of access to the sea and therefore its major port. Moreover, Djibouti is utilized as a transit port for other parts of the East African region.⁷ Some 60% of all commercial ships in the world use its waters from the Red Sea through the Bab-el-Mandeb strait and into the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean.⁸ Djibouti itself has few exports and the majority of its imports come from France. Another large contributor to the nation's GDP comes from the rent of military bases to USA, France and Japan. In 2015 the country also agreed a lease agreement with China for a navy base that might add an additional 100 million dollars per year.

As the Somali Issas control the ruling party and dominate the civil service and security services,⁹ relations between Djibouti's predominantly Somali and Afar ethnic groups remain a sensitive issue. This marginalization and perceived exclusion of the Afar has generated

⁴ The Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), *Democracy Index 2016*. Djibouti received a score of 2.83 (10 most democratic, 1 not democratic). See <http://www.eiu.com/Handlers/WhitepaperHandler.ashx?fi=Democracy-Index-2016.pdf&mode=wp&campaignid=DemocracyIndex2016>, last accessed 12 June 2017.

⁵ Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2016, Djibouti*. Given a score of 5.5 in freedom rating, (6 in political rights and 5 in civil liberties) on a 1 to 7 scale: 1 being most free, 7 not free at all. See <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2017/djibouti>, accessed 2 June 2017.

⁶ UN Human Development Index, 2016. http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/2016_human_development_report.pdf, last accessed 12 June 2017. Djibouti ranked 172 out of 188 countries.

⁷ Allgov.com, <http://www.allgov.com/nations?nationID=3539>.

⁸ US Department of State, 1 March 2012. Country Background Notes – Djibouti.

⁹ US Department of State, 2016 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices – Djibouti, 3 March 2017. <https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/2016/af/265248.htm>, last accessed 9 June 2017.

animosity and periodic armed resistance. Although, the governing coalition has remedied these tensions by including all of the country's major clan and ethnic groups, there remains discrimination on the basis of ethnicity in employment and job advancement.

Concluding remarks

The position of the Church is vulnerable. Due to the international community's interest in having a stable Djibouti as a strong partner for regional security, it is likely that political repression and other forms of human rights violations will be "overlooked" in exchange for continued internal stability. This could further anger the population and foment increased levels of anti-government sentiment across the country. This could have a negative impact on Christians as the Djiboutian state might well clamp down on all groups not under direct control. Or Muslim groups could further radicalize and blame Christians – as allegedly associates of the West – for supporting the regime and defending its repressive nature. Due to the fact that neighboring countries have become a hotspot for radicalization, the future of Djibouti will also depend on developments in the rest of the region.

WWL 2018: Church History and Facts

How many Christians?

Pop 2017	Christians	Chr%
911,000	11,100	1.2

Source: WCD, May 2017

How did Christians get there?

Christianity was introduced into the country following the arrival of the French, who first gained a foothold in the region in 1883 (which was named "French Somaliland" in 1894). The Roman Catholic Church sent its first priest from Arabia to Djibouti in 1883. In 1940 the Reformed Church of France was established. The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church has also established congregations in the country.

What church networks exist today? ¹⁰

Orthodox	Catholic	Protestant	Independent	Unaffiliated	Double-aff	Evangelical	Renewalist
2,100	7,400	750	350	480	-	360	

Source: WCD, May 2017

The French Protestant, Roman Catholic and Ethiopian Orthodox churches represent the only active Christian witness recognized by the government.

Christian radio and satellite TV are broadcast in the French language.

Religious context (selection)

Christian	Muslim	Hindu	Buddhist	Ethno-religionist	Jewish	Bahai	Atheist & others ¹¹
11,100	887,000	380	11,200	-	-	830	11,680

Source: WCD, May 2017

According to WCD figures, 97.4% of the population are Muslim, the majority of whom are Sunni. Islam is the state religion but the constitution provides for religious freedom. The small Christian minority is mainly made up of Roman Catholics and Ethiopian Orthodox. The small number of indigenous Christians from a Muslim background are persecuted by their families and society.

Approximately 60-65% of the population are ethnic Somalis of the Issa tribe. Most of the rest are of Afar descent, along with a small minority of ethnic French, Yemeni, and Ethiopian, most of whom are foreign nationals.

Notes on the current situation

- Government attitudes towards non-Muslims are generally of tolerance and respect, but societal animosity towards Christians is on the increase.
- Although proselytism is not technically illegal, it is discouraged.
- Conversion from Islam is strongly discouraged and even interest in conversion can lead to intense persecution.

¹⁰ **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.

¹¹ 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: 56 / Position: 50

WWL 2017 Points: 57 / Position: 40

WWL 2016 Points: 58 / Position: 28

Where persecution comes from

Government officials, family members, community leaders and some Muslim (religious) leaders are all drivers of persecution in Djibouti. The undemocratic and paranoid government of the incumbent president seeks to control all aspects of society by stifling freedom of association, freedom of religion and freedom of expression. One of the reasons why the situation for Christians in Djibouti is precarious is the geographical location of the country itself. Djibouti is located in the Horn of Africa and is surrounded by volatile countries with repressive governments like Eritrea, Somalia and Yemen. It acts as a transit zone for radical Islamic thought and jihadists.

How Christians are suffering

Djibouti's Constitution declares Islam to be the state religion. All laws and policies in the country are shaped by Sharia law and any law or policy inconsistent with Sharia is null and void. All Christian communities in the country thus face difficulties. However, the level of persecution that Christians with a Muslim background experience is immense and comes both from the local community and their own family members. Hiding one's faith is one means of protection but the communal lifestyle makes this very difficult. If one converts to Christianity or there are rumors of a possible conversion, that person will lose any inheritance rights and is also likely to have difficulty claiming custody of any children. They are monitored by their families, people from the mosque, and other community members. The local authorities do not properly protect Christians if they are attacked.

Examples

- Most Djiboutians are conservative Sunni Muslims and have strong family ties in Somalia and Yemen. These families do not tolerate any conversion to another religion.
- Some imams are using Friday sermons to ridicule Christians and Christianity.
- Christians - especially converts from Islam - face hindrances in their social interactions.
- In the WWL 2018 reporting period, there was no violence against Christians reported.

WWL 2018: Persecution Dynamics

Reporting period: 1 November 2016 - 31 October 2017

WWL 2018 Points: 56 / Position: 50

WWL 2017 Points: 57 / Position: 40

WWL 2016 Points: 58 / Position: 28

Contents

Position on World Watch List (WWL).....	8
Persecution engines	8
Drivers of persecution.....	10
Context	10
Christian communities and how they are affected	11
Pressure in the 5 spheres of life and violence	12
Gender profile of persecution.....	14
Future outlook.....	14
Policy considerations.....	14

Position on World Watch List (WWL)

Djibouti scores 56 points in WWL 2018, dropping one point from its score in WWL 2017. The gradual decrease in scores in the past years indicate that even though Christians still face challenges, Djibouti is not like its neighboring countries - Eritrea and Somalia - where Christians face extreme persecution. The decrease in one point in the WWL 2018 reporting period is due to a decrease in violence from 1.1 in WWL 2017 to zero.

Persecution engines

Persecution engines in Djibouti ¹²	Level of influence
Islamic oppression	Strong
Religious nationalism	Not at all
Ethnic antagonism	Strong
Denominational protectionism	Not at all
Communist and post-Communist oppression	Not at all
Secular intolerance	Not at all
Dictatorial paranoia	Medium
Organized corruption and crime	Not at all

¹² The scale for the level of influence of Persecution engines and Drivers in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong.

Islamic oppression (Strong):

Islam is very deep-rooted in society, and hence any other religion is regarded as alien. Furthermore, Djibouti's geographical location is very convenient both for international trade and for the transit of jihadists from the Horn of Africa to the Middle East and vice-versa. Approximately 95% of the Djiboutian population is Sunni Muslim. Radical Islam is growing in the country in a similar pattern to other East African countries and is a major concern for the government. The government attempts to control the content of the Muslim Friday sermons and who does the preaching. Approximately 60% of Djiboutians are ethnic Somali, and so the growth of radical Islam in Somalia affects society in Djibouti too.

Ethnic antagonism (Strong):

Djibouti is the home of the Afar and Issa ethnic groups. The Issa belong to the larger Somali tribe. Tribalism in the country is so deeply rooted that any attempt to accept Christianity is deemed a betrayal of the tribe. As in Somalia, there is a close connection between tribe and Islam in Djibouti. Christians will be isolated and treated badly for their faith.

Dictatorial paranoia (Medium):

This is one of the main causes of the persecution of Christians in the country. More than any other religious or cultural rationale, the fact that the regime seeks to stay in power at all costs is critical for understanding the current state of affairs for Christians in Djibouti. In 1999 President Aptidon announced that he would not run in the presidential election and the current President Ismael Omar Guelleh was elected. In 2000, the government and the radical faction of Afar Front for the Restoration of Unity and Democracy (FRUD) signed a peace agreement finally putting an end to the civil war. President Ismael, who is still in power, does not want to be viewed as moderate by the radical forces in his party. Thus any people thought to be a threat to his political power are treated in a tough manner – this includes the Christian communities.

Djibouti is rated as “not free” by the Freedom House 2017 report.¹³ The World Press Freedom Index of 2017 published by Reporters Without Borders also puts Djibouti in the top ten worst countries regarding freedom of expression and information.¹⁴ According to the report, the ruling party has continued harassing and intimidating those who speak out about what is going on in the country. The report says: “Judicial harassment, illegal searches, exorbitant fines resulting in detention for non-payment – the repressive arsenal used against Djibouti's journalists has it all. As a result, no privately-owned or independent media outlet operates within the country. The Freedom of Communication Law is itself an obstacle to free speech and media pluralism. It provides for jail terms for media offenses and imposes age and nationality restrictions on those who can create a media outlet.”¹⁵

Theoretically, the Djiboutian government upholds the constitutional protection of religious freedom. However, in practice, the government attempts to control all religious institutions and the general attitude of the government towards Christians and other non-Muslim minorities is negative. The main drivers underpinning this persecution engine are officials

¹³ See <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2017/djibouti>, last accessed 15 September 2017.

¹⁴ See <https://rsf.org/en/djibouti>, last accessed 20 September 2017.

¹⁵ Id.

aligned with the Djiboutian government. The government's negative attitude towards Christians might increase in the future due to an intensification of foreign investments from neighboring Gulf countries in a series of economic sectors (including Islamic banking).

Drivers of persecution

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

The six main Persecution drivers in the country listed above are often intertwined. Government officials and some Muslim radicals are the main ones. A country researcher states: "There are instances wherein government officials at lower level engaged in activities considered as persecution of the Christian community including (but not limited to) deportation of Christians from neighboring countries under the pretext of not having legal status without conducting the necessary check." Political parties in the country also show themselves to be unfavorable towards Christians. For converts, family (both extended and nuclear) and community leaders and members are at the forefront of driving persecution.

Context

Djibouti is a Muslim majority country (with a Muslim population of more than 90%). It is a small, poverty-stricken country, surrounded by some of the most volatile and repressive nations like Eritrea, Somalia and Yemen. It is basically a city-state, with a minimum of natural resources within its own borders. Nevertheless, it has a very favorable geographical location along one of the busiest shipping routes.

On the political front, the current government is the product of tension between the Afar and Issa, the two dominant and rival ethnic groups who waged a bloody civil war in the 1990s. The wounds from this civil war have not yet healed completely. On the religious front, Islam is deeply embedded in Djibouti's society, but Christianity has also existed in Djibouti for a long time, partly because of ties with Ethiopia.

On a social level, a significant number of Djibouti's citizens have close family ties with Somalia, Yemen and other Muslim countries with a strongly ingrained negative attitude towards the West and Christianity (which is perceived as a Western religion). Djibouti is a member state of

the Arab League (without being Arab). Since its independence from France in 1977, Djibouti has been governed by a non-democratic, semi-presidential regime currently headed by Ismail Omer Guelleh. In 1999, Guelleh succeeded his uncle and he is only the second president since 1977. During the Arab Spring uprisings of 2011, Guelleh and his ruling political party “People’s Rally for Progress” survived several demonstrations through violent means. The regime is autocratic and there is no freedom of expression and press. The government owns all media outlets. Even though around 11,000 of the population is Christian, none are in a position to assume public office. Their role and participation in the political process is either limited or non-existent. Constitutionally, Islam is accorded the status of state religion.

Djibouti does not have a diversified economy, in part due to a lack of natural resources and poorly developed industries. This leads to the country needing international support. Djibouti receives this support both from Arab and Western countries. In exchange for the support of the latter, the Djiboutian government supports Western efforts to fight Islamic terrorism, for example, in the fight against piracy off the coast of Somalia and the Gulf of Aden. Although this international support might not change the negative attitude towards Christians, it does serve to shield Christians from more repressive actions by the regime. The country is located at a very strategic location on the Gulf of Aden, which radical Islamic groups seek to exploit.

Last but not least, the country’s border dispute with Eritrea might have a long term impact on the stability of the country as Djibouti is accusing Eritrea of occupying the territory once patrolled by Qatari peace keepers.¹⁶

There are other minority groups in the country: Jehovah’s Witnesses, Hindus, Jews, and Bahai. However, country researchers did not find any concrete evidence to suggest that they also face persecution.

Christian communities and how they are affected

All Christian communities in Djibouti face challenges, each experiencing different levels of persecution.

Communities of expatriate Christians:

Expatriate Christians in Djibouti, some of whom have lived in the country for decades, are not immune from persecution. In the past there was some sort of tolerance. However, the tolerance towards Orthodox Christians originating from Ethiopia is withering away as radical Islam is rising. Congregations made up of French and US service personnel experience minimal restrictions.

Historical Christian communities:

In the WWL analysis for Djibouti this category has been combined with the category for expatriate Christians above. (The French Protestant, Roman Catholic and Ethiopian Orthodox churches represent the only active Christian witness recognized by the government.)

¹⁶ See: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-djibouti-eritrea-border/djibouti-eritrea-in-territorial-dispute-after-qatar-peacekeepers-leave-idUSKBN1971JR>, last accessed 20 September 2017.

Communities of converts to Christianity:

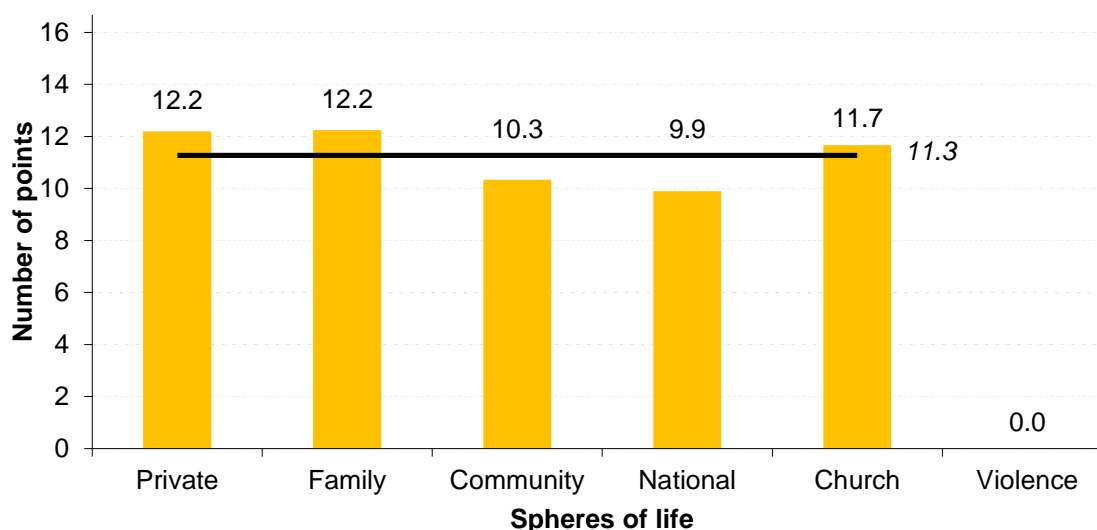
Christians with a Muslim background, even though few in number, face intense pressure from the family, community and those fulfilling (religious) leadership roles at community level. This is particularly true outside the city where the lifestyle is communal and pastoralist. Converts do not have the luxury of giving their children Christian names, or of celebrating Christian weddings and Church festivals. They have to stay underground and live their Christian life in secret. Converts have even been discriminated against and harassed in refugee camps.

Non-traditional Christian communities:

This group consists of Baptist, Evangelical and Pentecostal congregations who are known for their interest in evangelization and hence face severe persecution.

Pressure in the 5 spheres of life and violence

WWL 2018 Persecution Pattern for Djibouti



(The maximum score for each block is 16.7)

The WWL 2018 Persecution pattern for Djibouti shows:

- The average pressure on Christians in Djibouti increased from 11.1 in WWL 2017 to 11.3 in WWL 2018.
- Pressure is strongest in the *Private and Family spheres*, both scoring very high with 12.2 points. This is mainly due to the huge pressure on converts. Next highest is the *Church sphere* with a score of 11.7. This high score indicates that building a new church, organizing church events, working with youth, and speaking out about persecution are all very difficult.
- There were no reports of violent incidents. The score for violence is therefore zero, compared to 1.1 in WWL 2017.

Private sphere:

Christians with a Muslim background are particularly affected in their private life. A country researcher notes: “In a country where more than 95% of the population is Muslim, conversion from Islam to Christianity is very much discouraged and persecuted in some cases. In most it happened when a Muslim marries a Christian. Such conversion is not welcomed by the family members of the convert, his community and in some cases by local government for such conversation is taken as undermining Islam as a religion.” Christians have difficulties owning Christian materials, worshipping, and expressing Christian views and opinions without opposition. Converts are monitored by families, people from the local mosque and by other community members.

Family sphere:

Researchers have found that Christians are facing problems in raising their children according to their faith: “This is mainly reflected by the fact that Christians are not allowed to have Christian schools that will enable them to have a curriculum designed to teach kids about Christianity in addition to regular classes. The regular curriculum is mainly designed taking the majority Muslim population into consideration, and getting approval to open schools designed to teach any other curriculum is not easy.”

Converts face particularly serious persecution from their families. Hiding one’s faith is one means of protection but the communal lifestyle makes this very difficult. If a Muslim converts to Christianity or there are rumors of a possible conversion, that person will lose any inheritance rights and is also likely to have difficulty claiming custody of his/her children.

Community sphere:

For Christians in Djibouti, interaction with other community members is not easy, since the lifestyle is very communal. If a convert’s Christian faith becomes known, he/she is likely to encounter hindrance in sharing community resources, harassment, and discrimination in getting a job. Those influenced by radical sheiks and imams in the mosques and community meetings are most active against Christians in this *sphere of life*. In comparing what Christians in the capital city and other places face, one researcher states: “Christian communities are basically located in and around the capital city. Those Christians living in other parts of the country are not treated fairly compared to those living in the capital city.”

National sphere:

The mother of all government enacted laws, the Constitution, declares Islam to be the state religion. All laws and policies in the country are shaped by Sharia law; any law or policy inconsistent with Sharia is null and void. Christians are considered second class citizens. Some imams are using Friday sermons to ridicule Christians and Christianity. Local authorities do not protect Christians when they are attacked.

Church sphere:

Registration of a place of worship is a lengthy process and is carried out by the Ministry of Interior. For those who do not want to see Christian symbols in the country, church buildings are an insult. Thus, church life is made as difficult as possible for all Christians. Building a

church, organizing events, working with youth, and speaking out about persecution are some of the challenges they face. Those who belong to expatriate churches are relatively better off. Convert groups are neither able to register nor build a church.

Violence:

There was no violence against Christians recorded in the WWL 2018 reporting period.

Gender profile of persecution

Female:

The typical challenge that female Christians face, especially converts, is rape and forced marriage.

Male:

Data not available.

Future outlook

In the WWL 2018 reporting period there has not been any significant change in the country or in the region in terms of freedom of religion. Yet the situation in the region in general (and Ethiopia in particular) is deteriorating in terms of stability. The border issue with Eritrea might have an impact on the country's stability as well. *Islamic oppression, Dictatorial paranoia* and *Ethnic antagonism* will remain the main challenges for Christians in the future. Djibouti is relatively stable, but is not a democracy. There is no room for dissent. President Guelleh and his government are still in firm control of the country. Due to a reciprocal relationship between Western nations (France and the USA in particular) and the Djiboutian government, the latter have an incentive not to sponsor violence against Christians; however, to expect a positive development regarding freedom of expression and association (two fundamental rights very connected to freedom of religion) would be plainly naive. Thus in the near future:

- The border dispute with Eritrea will almost certainly not be solved.
- The current status quo is expected to continue for the coming few years.
- The war in Yemen might also pose another challenge to Djibouti. Islamic militants who are fighting in Yemen might cross the ocean with those escaping the conflict and expand their networks in Djibouti.

Policy considerations

Christians in Djibouti have been persecuted in many ways, even though the level of violence is not as high as in neighboring countries such as Eritrea or Somalia. Open Doors suggests the following policy considerations:

- The government of Djibouti should protect Christians from harassment perpetrated by radical groups.
- Western governments with strong reciprocal relations with Djibouti, especially the USA and France, should engage the government of Djibouti regarding freedom of religion

and belief, as well as freedom of expression, the situation of Christians in particular, and counter-terrorism measures as the threat of an influx of jihadists crossing from Yemen increases.

- Anti-Christian sentiment has spread within society without any preventative action being taken by the government. Therefore, the international community should urge the government of Djibouti to establish an interfaith commission.

WWR in-depth reports

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

Open Doors article(s) from the region

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

World Watch Monitor news articles

There are currently no recent WWM news articles on Djibouti. Any new articles will be made available at: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/countries/djibouti/>

Recent country developments

There are currently no recent items on Djibouti. Any new articles will be made available at:
<http://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=Djibouti> (password: freedom).

[Return to top of document](#)