



## OMAN: Country Dossier

June 2018



**OpenDoors**

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

Open Doors International / World Watch Research Unit

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[research@od.org](mailto:research@od.org)

[www.opendoorsanalytical.org](http://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 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.

# OMAN – Country Dossier (June 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.

OMAN		
World Watch List	Score	Rank
WWL 2018	57	46
WWL 2017	53	49
WWL 2016	53	50
WWL 2015	55	39
WWL 2014	56	27

<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 OMAN

## Link for general background information:

BBC country profile: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-14654150>

## Recent country history

Located at the confluence of the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Sea, Oman was an influential sultanate during the medieval period. Arabic is the official language, and more than half of Oman's population is Arab. Having been occupied by the Portuguese, Ottomans and others in the 18th century, the sultanate became powerful and took control of the coastal region of present-day Iran and Pakistan, colonized Zanzibar and Kenyan seaports, brought back enslaved Africans, and sent boats trading as far as the Malay Peninsula. The country was finally subdued by British forces and treaties of friendship and cooperation with Great Britain were signed in 1798 allowing the country to maintain its independence.

In 1971, Oman joined the League of Arab States and the United Nations. Oman generally has good relations with neighboring countries. "Oman fully supported the Bahraini regime in spring 2011, and was also grateful to receive military help from Saudi Arabia to deal with its own protesters."<sup>4</sup>

## The religious landscape

Islam is the state religion. Oman was one of the countries reached by Islam within Muhammad's lifetime. Omanis practice a unique brand of Islam called Ibadhism, which remains a majority sect only in Oman. Ibadhism has been characterized as "moderate conservatism," with tenets that are a mixture of both austerity and tolerance. According to experts on the sect, the followers of the Ibadi sect are not violent in comparison with Sunni or Shiites.<sup>5</sup> They do not believe in violence, even towards those who leave Islam or who are not Muslims, but rather focus on "dissociation" which is usually an internal attitude of withholding "friendship" (*wilaya*). Thus, even though Islam dominates the lives of Omanis, there is also a tendency to tolerate Christians – a tolerance not found in some of the neighboring countries. This tolerance is strengthened by the Sultan, who is trying to present the country internationally as a symbol of tolerance and diplomacy, especially by attempting to mediate in international talks with some of the militant groups in the region.

The constitutional provision regarding religious freedom is full of contradictions. On the one hand, it provides for religious freedom, and on the other hand it states that the practice of freedom of religion should not violate established customs, public policy or public morals.

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<sup>4</sup> Bertelsmann Transformation Index, 2012.

<sup>5</sup> See: <http://islam.uga.edu/ibadis.html>, last accessed on 26 July 2017.

## The political landscape

The country is ruled by a monarchy with two advisory bodies (State Council and Consultative Council). The current Sultan came to power in 1970 after deposing his own father. He is credited for abolishing slavery in the country and giving Oman a strong economy. He has brought his country into a strong alliance with the United States, which has been interested in its oil reserves and its strategic location relative to Iran, the Persian Gulf, and Middle Eastern oil fields.<sup>6</sup> He is also credited for bringing security and stability to a country that has had a history of war and conflict. While many other Arab states have succumbed to sectarian violence and political tumult, the sultanate of Oman has stood out as a beacon of tranquility and tolerance.

The Sultan is also credited with introducing some democratic reforms. For example, in 1997, women were granted the right to be elected to the country's consultative body, the Shura Council (Majlis al-Shura). In 2003, the Sultan extended voting rights to everyone over 21; previously, voters were selected from among the elite, and only about a quarter of the population was allowed to vote. Despite all modernization and the abolishment of slavery many years ago, the attitude of slavery is still there.

The Basic Statute of the State (issued in 1996) is the country's constitution. It was amended in 2011 as a response to the protests that year. Nevertheless, the Sultan's control over the country is still in place.

## The socio-economic landscape

Oil and gas wealth has promoted massive social transformation since 1970. Education levels have improved considerably. The younger generations are interested in new ideas - visible also in the clothing of younger people. Moreover, a cultural shift is taking place from agrarian nomadic to urban lifestyle. To tackle future unemployment - more than half the population is under 21 - Oman is gradually replacing expatriates with nationals. Due to this, the percentage of educated and skilled Omanis is growing. Female education has dramatically reduced illiteracy. Literacy is 75%. Highly educated teachers and technicians from abroad are currently in demand but ultimately "Omanization" will lead to a decrease in the level of non-Muslim residents.

The Sultan of Oman has a monopoly on the use of force, and political opposition is weak. At the same time, Oman has a free and competitive market economy. Moreover: "Oman's government has initiated laws to encourage and facilitate foreign investment and to offer incentives for both private and foreign investors. The program to privatize a number of wholly or partly state-owned enterprises has sped up considerably since 2003."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> See <http://www.stratfor.com/video/conversation-omans-geopolitical-importance#axzz3Cp2Ek5dY>, last accessed on 26 July 2017.

<sup>7</sup> Bertelsmann Transformation Index, 2012

## Concluding remarks

The future of Christians in Oman is shaped by social, political, and regional factors. Any weakening of the regime could lead to further Islamization of the country's political institutions and a stricter application of Sharia legislation. The Sultan is believed to be the main force behind the security and stability of the country; he is ageing and reports have indicated that his health is deteriorating. Thus, if his influence ceases, the country might fall into the hands of radical Muslims. Furthermore, the current civil war in Yemen might also eventually affect the country.

On the other hand, there is also the positive trend in the country of the government trying to develop a culture of religious harmony as can be seen in its support of the [Al-Amana Center](#)<sup>8</sup> which works to promote dialogue and understanding between Muslims and Christians.

## WWL 2018: Church History and Facts

### How many Christians?

Pop 2017	Christians	Chr%
4,741,000	204,000	4.3

Source: WCD, May 2017

### How did Christians get there?

Christianity is believed to have first entered Oman with the coming of the Portuguese in 1507–1508 and also to have departed with them.<sup>9</sup> A new era for mission began in 1889–1890 with the arrival of James Cantine and Samuel Zwemer (1867– 1952) in Muscat, Oman's capital. Their visit was part of their work with the American Arab Mission. In 1894 the Reformed Church in America (RCA) assumed sponsorship of their work, which extended throughout the region. The RCA opened a hospital in Muscat, which became the center of the nation's Christian presence for many years. This work, now known as the Protestant Church of Oman, includes Protestants of many denominational backgrounds and continues to be served by RCA personnel. Its work is concentrated in Muscat and in the nearby communities of Ruwi and Ghala. The Sultan of Oman also granted to the church parcels of land in Salalah and Sohar.<sup>10</sup>

The Roman Catholic Church re-established itself in the area in 1841 with an assignment of personnel to Aden (Yemen). That work grew successively into a prefecture (1854) and a vicariate (1888), and in 1889 it gave birth to the Vicariate of Arabia, now administered from Abu Dhabi (United Arab Emirates) and responsible for Catholics in Oman. The first Catholic

<sup>8</sup> See: <http://alamanacentre.org/?pageid=3a>, last accessed November 2018.

<sup>9</sup> Melton J. & Baumann M. (Editors), *Religions of the World* (Second Edition), ABC-CLIO, 2010, p.2147.

<sup>10</sup> Id.

Church in Oman was erected in 1977 in Muscat, and subsequently, as the community has grown, other churches have appeared.<sup>11</sup>

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

Orthodox	Catholic	Protestant	Independent	Unaffiliated	Double-aff	Evangelical	Renewalist
24,700	144,000	11,400	20,400	3,600	-	5,800	36,100

Source: WCD, May 2017

Indigenous Christians (i.e. Christians with a Muslim background) number only a few hundred.

According to Middle East Concern, “expatriate Christians enjoy considerable freedom in Oman, provided their activities are restricted to designated compounds and that they avoid interaction with Muslims that could be construed as proselytism. Church compounds are typically overcrowded on days of worship as they seek to accommodate multiple congregations of various nationalities and languages.” There are church compounds in Muscat, Sohar and Salalah, with facilities for Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant churches. Land has also been made available for other non-Islamic forms of worship. There are discreet efforts being made to obtain permission for a church in Buraimi. The umbrella organization for Protestants, the Protestant Churches in Oman (PCO), has an Arabic-speaking congregation (for expatriates). The PCO has a voluntary reporting arrangement with the Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs. One consequence is that those working with Omani Christians are very cautious in their relationship with the PCO, and vice-versa. [4] The Anglican Church is one of the main expatriate groups and its congregations are under the jurisdiction of the Episcopal Church in Jerusalem and the Middle East.

## Religious context (selection)

Christian	Muslim	Hindu	Buddhist	Ethno-religionist	Jewish	Bahai	Atheist & others <sup>13</sup>
204,000	4,203,000	253,000	31,800	790	-	14,500	8,810

Also to note: Sikh: 26,400

Source: WCD, May 2017

According to WCD statistics, 88.7% of Oman’s inhabitants are Muslim, with most Omanis (75%) following the conservative Ibadi sect of Islam. The next largest religion in the country is Hinduism with 5.3% of the total population.

<sup>11</sup> Id.

<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.

## Notes on the current situation

The Sultan of Oman is believed to be the main force behind the security and stability of the country; he is ageing and reports have indicated that his health is deteriorating. Thus, if his influence ceases, there is the danger that the influence of radical Islam in the country will increase.

## WWL 2018: Short & Simple Persecution Profile

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

**WWL 2018 Points: 57 / Position: 46**

WWL 2017 Points: 53 / Position: 49

WWL 2016 Points: 53 / Position: 50

## Where persecution comes from

As in other Gulf countries, Islam dominates Oman's society, politics and legal system (Sharia law). However, due to the dominance of Ibadism, an Islamic sect only practiced by a majority in Oman, it is a country where Christians and even converts from Islam do not face any violent repercussions. Ibadism has been characterized as "moderate conservatism," with tenets combining both austerity and tolerance. According to experts, the followers of the Ibadi sect are non-violent in comparison to Sunni or Shiite Muslims. They do not believe in violence, even towards those who leave Islam or who are not Muslims.

Nevertheless, Omani society is conservative and tribal relationships are important. Tribe and religion are inter-connected; leaving Islam is therefore seen as betrayal of both tribe and family and both will put pressure on a convert to return to Islam.

The Omani government actively promotes religious tolerance, in contrast to neighboring countries. However, this does not alter the fact that public law is based on Sharia law, allowing the freedom of religion only as long as it does not violate established customs, policy or public morals. Furthermore, the non-democratic government keeps its citizens, especially minorities, under strict surveillance.

## How Christians are suffering

Expatriate Christian communities are tolerated in Oman, but all religious organizations must be registered with the authorities. Their facilities are restricted in order not to offend nationals and Christian meetings are monitored to record any political messages and nationals attending. Furthermore, it is difficult to build and register new churches.

Converts from Islam to Christianity are put under pressure from family and society to recant their faith. They can be expelled from the family home and from their jobs and they have to take precautions to avoid discrimination, harassment, and bullying. There is also legal



discrimination to contend with; for example, it is stated in the family code that “a convert husband will lose his right to custody upon divorce”.

Although the Islamic State group has suffered major set-backs recently, its radical ideas still influence Omani society. Uncorroborated reports have indicated that Islamic State networks are emerging in the country, which is particularly worrying for the Christian community.

## Examples

- Public proselytizing is forbidden; it can only be done privately. Reportedly, some converts and expatriate Christians involved in proselytization were called in for questioning.
- The government pays salary for some Sunni imams but not for Shia or non-Muslim religious leaders.
- Non-Muslim religious groups must register with the government which then approves and controls the leases of building to such groups.

## WWL 2018: Persecution Dynamics

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

**WWL 2018 Points: 57 / Position: 46**

WWL 2017 Points: 53 / Position: 49

WWL 2016 Points: 53 / Position: 50

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## Position on World Watch List (WWL)

Oman rose from a score of 53 in WWL 2017 to 57 points in WWL 2018. More violence reported during the WWL 2018 reporting period caused some of this increase of 4 points. However, in the WWL analysis a refinement has been made concerning how the situation of converts from Islam to Christianity is recorded. In Oman this contributed to the rise in overall score.

## Persecution engines

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

### Islamic oppression (Very strong):

Islam is the state religion and legislation is based mainly on Islamic law. All state school curricula include instruction in Islam. Apostasy is not a criminal offense, but it is not respected by the legal system either, which assumes that all citizens are Muslims. National holidays are religious holidays, which means Christians are forced to adhere to the Islamic calendar, celebrations and customs. Wavering from the Omani/Islamic agenda is to set oneself in opposition of the government and the people, which many are fearful of doing. A convert from Islam to Christianity faces problems under the Personal Status and Family Code, which prohibits a father from having custody over his children if he leaves Islam. Society shuns those who leave Islam, even though violence is not encouraged.

### Ethnic antagonism (Strong):

Tribal values, in which family honor plays a very important role, are blended with Islamic values. To be Omani is to be Muslim. There is not one without the other. There is great pride in being Omani, and often the celebration of tradition is held in higher regard than the meaning behind the tradition. To break with tradition or to question the reasons behind it are unimaginable for the general population.

### Dictatorial paranoia (Strong):

Oman has been ruled by a dynasty that does not respect the will of the people. There is discontent among the Omanis who generally believe that the government is authoritarian, even though they accept that recent economic reforms have been beneficial. In its 2017 report, Freedom House rated the country as “not free”.<sup>15</sup> According to the report: “The regime

<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.

<sup>15</sup> See: <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2017/oman>, last accessed 4 October 2017.

imposes limits on virtually all political rights and civil liberties, and responds particularly harshly to criticism and dissent.”<sup>16</sup> The media also faces harassment and intimidation.

## Drivers of persecution

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

### Drivers of Islamic oppression:

Local Omani Christians have been interrogated by government officials, commanded to stop meeting, and have faced threats of losing their jobs and homes. Many have faced persecution from their families. Christian expatriate workers have been interrogated and instructed not to share their faith, or risk losing their visas. In this way, government and society complement each other. The government restrains Christianity from above, meeting the wishes of their citizens to have an Islamic country. On the other hand, society pressures both indigenous and expatriate Christians to comply with the Islamic rules, giving the government no need to act forcefully against Christians and to maintain a friendly face towards the world, especially the West.

### Drivers of Ethnic antagonism:

For Omanis, being Omani is their nationality, but their tribe is their real identity. As a communal society, a convert to Christianity brings great shame on the entire tribe. The leaders of the tribe and of the family then bear the burden of restoring honor to the tribe. This can only be done if the person returns to Islam, leaves the community, or dies. The persecution most often seen is the unwavering pressure to return to Islam, or the complete abandonment of the individual by their community.

### Drivers of Dictatorial paranoia:

While the Sultan is very popular for the progress and prosperity the country has seen under his rule, he is also a dictator. While many Christians fear the monitoring of their phones and social media, most often this technology is focused on Omanis and is used to suppress any hint of dissension or critique of the government.

<sup>16</sup> See: <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2017/oman>, last accessed 4 October 2017.

## Context

(For a more detailed overview, please see the ‘Keys to Understanding’ section above.)

Located at the confluence of the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Sea, Oman was an influential sultanate during the medieval period. Arabic is the official language, and more than half of Oman’s population is Arab. In 1971, Oman joined the League of Arab States and the United Nations. Oman generally has good relations with neighboring countries.

The current Sultan came to power in 1970 after deposing his own father. He is credited for abolishing slavery in the country and for giving Oman a strong economy. He has brought his country into a strong alliance with the United States, which has been interested in its oil reserves and its strategic location in relation to Iran, the Persian Gulf and Middle Eastern oil fields.<sup>17</sup> He is also credited for bringing security and stability to a country that has had a history of war and conflict. The Sultan is also credited with introducing some democratic reforms. Despite all modernization and the abolishment of slavery many years ago, the attitude of slavery is still there and the Sultan’s strict control over the country is still in place. The Sultan of Oman has a monopoly on the use of force, and political opposition is weak.

At the same time, Oman has a free and competitive market economy. Oil and gas wealth has promoted massive social transformation since 1970. Education levels have improved considerably. Female education has dramatically reduced illiteracy. The younger generations are interested in new ideas - visible also in the clothing of younger people. Moreover, a cultural shift is taking place from agrarian nomadic to urban lifestyle.

### **Persecution of non-Christians groups:**

Other religious groups – such as Hindus, Buddhists and non-Ibadi Muslims groups - are relatively free to practice their own beliefs. The Oman 2016 International Religious Freedom Report stated that “the groups were more likely to face government scrutiny for activities not related to religion and could face prosecution for unlicensed financial arrangements”.

## Christian communities and how they are affected

### **Communities of expatriate Christians:**

There are a number of expatriate communities in Oman, centered mainly in the major urban areas of Muscat, Sohar, and Salalah. These include Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Protestant congregations. There are more than sixty different Christian groups, fellowships, and assemblies active in the capital city, Muscat. All religious organizations must register, and Christian meetings are monitored to record any political messages and nationals attending. Foreign Christians are allowed to worship discreetly in private homes or work compounds. Their facilities are restricted in order not to offend nationals.

### **Historical Christian communities:**

There are no historical Christian communities present in the country.

<sup>17</sup> See <http://www.stratfor.com/video/conversation-omans-geopolitical-importance#axzz3Cp2Ek5dY>, last accessed on 26 July 2017.

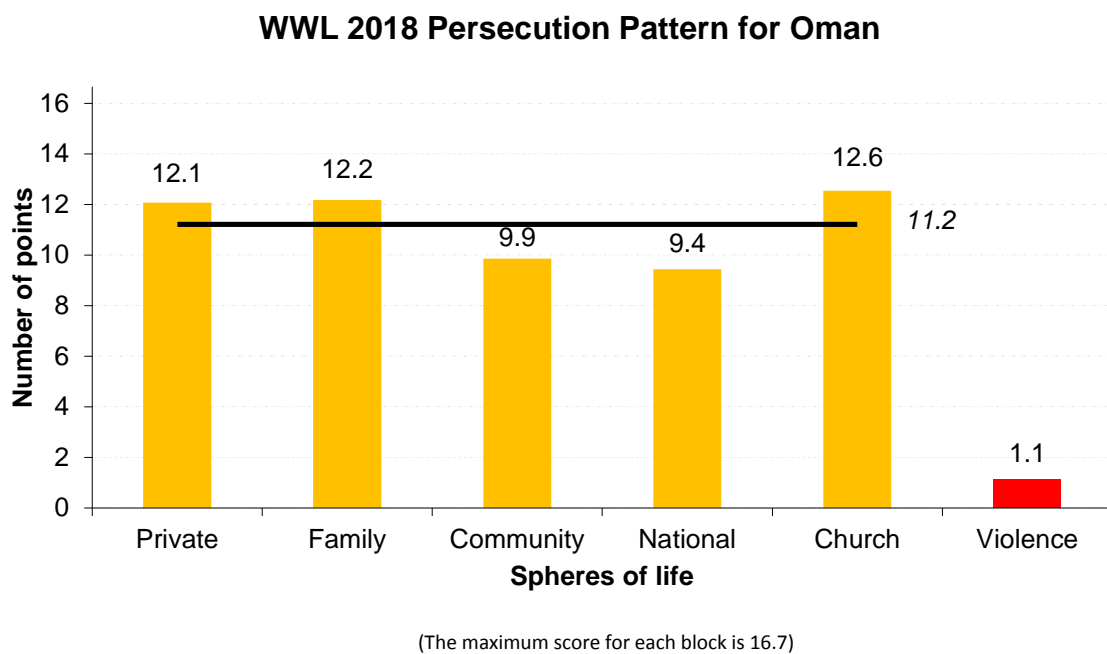
### Communities of converts to Christianity:

Converts from Islam to Christianity risk persecution from family and society, mostly in the form of pressure to renounce their faith and by withholding relationships. Converts can lose their family, as the law prohibits a father who leaves Islam from retaining paternal rights over his children.

### Non-traditional Christian communities:

There are no non-traditional Christian communities in the country.

## Pressure in the 5 spheres of life and violence



The WWL 2018 Persecution pattern for Oman shows:

- Overall, the pressure on Christians in Oman remains very high, especially on converts in the *Private* and *Family sphere*. The average score for pressure increased from 10.6 in WWL 2017 to 11.2. This was mainly due to the refinement in WWL analysis for registering the situation of converts from Islam to Christianity in Oman.
- Pressure is strongest in the *Church* (12.6), *Family* (12.2) and *Private* (12.1) *spheres of life*, which is typical for a situation resulting from the Persecution engine Islamic oppression.
- The score for violence increased from 0.2 in WWL 2017 to 1.1 because of an arson attack on a church hall. Some Christians were also called in for questioning by the police (as was also the case during the WWL 2017 period).
- The overall persecution situation in Oman is fueled by a non-violent but conservative society. The drivers include family members (both nuclear and extended), government officials, community leaders and non-Christian religious leaders.

**Private sphere:**

Oman is one of the few countries where Islam is state religion, but conversion is not a crime. Yet there are consequences, especially on issues related to family matters and converts in particular face persecution in their private life. One country researcher states: “There are societal discrimination and abuses based on religious affiliation, beliefs and practice. Close to 70% of the citizens are Muslims. It is particularly dangerous for converts to reveal their Christian faith due to the possible threat of discrimination and also legal consequences of conversion in child custody cases. Therefore, for Christians to reveal their faith in written form of personal expressions has its risks.”

**Family sphere:**

Converts can only marry under Islamic rites. A researcher adds: “A convert husband will lose his right to custody upon divorce. That is what the personal status and family code clearly puts.” Despite this, there are still Omanis who convert to Christianity.

**Community sphere:**

In their communities – and particularly in schools - it is especially converts who have to take precautions to avoid discrimination, harassment, and bullying. A country researcher notes: “Public school curricula include Islamic teachings. It is a must for Muslim students to take Islamic teachings. Christians or other non-Muslims are not obliged to take the Islamic teaching courses. However, converts who do not want to reveal their new Christian faith for safety reasons will still be required to take the Islamic teachings. In addition, there is no similar Christian teaching included in school curricula for Christian students.”

**National sphere:**

Often the pressure exerted in the national sphere has a massive impact on shaping the persecution dynamics in a given country. In Oman, Islam is the state religion and Sharia law is the principal source of legislation. That means Christians have to live under policies and laws that are enacted in accordance with Islam.

**Church sphere:**

It is true that there are many recognized congregations and churches in Oman. Yet building and registering a church is difficult. The government must also approve the construction and leasing of buildings by religious groups. The law prohibits public proselytizing by all religious groups, although the government tolerates private proselytizing within legally registered houses. Tolerating private proselytizing is something that characterizes the country, as this is impossible and even dangerous in neighboring countries. In this way, the government wants to present the country as Islamic to its neighbors, while being tolerant towards minorities at the same time.

**Violence:**

There was an increase in violence. According to a country researcher, a hall rented by expatriate Christians in Nizwa and used as a place of worship was set on fire. Reportedly, most of their equipment was burnt. A few local youngsters were found fleeing the scene, but no

action was taken to find the perpetrators. During the year, a few local Christians as well as expatriates were called in for questioning.

Besides this, it is well known that under the official *kafala* sponsorship system, domestic workers are tied to their employers, who confiscate their passport and can force them to work excessive hours.<sup>18</sup> This leaves them vulnerable to abuse. Open Doors fears that Christian domestic workers are even more vulnerable and face greater discrimination because of their faith. However, there are no clear signs of persecution related to mistreatment of Christian expatriate workers. More research into this subject will be conducted in the near future.

## Gender profile of persecution

### Female:

In general, the position of women in Oman is vulnerable. Society is very conservative with the lives of women and girls being controlled by their husband or guardian. This environment makes it especially difficult for women to convert from Islam to Christianity.

### Male:

There is no separate information about the persecution of Christian men, but it is safe to assume that Christian expatriate men face most discrimination on the work floor.

## Future outlook

The future of Christians in Oman is shaped by social, political, and regional factors. Looking at the situation of many countries in the Middle East and the Gulf, it is very difficult to envision anything positive and Oman is no exception. If social unrest happens in the future, the regime might weaken, which may, in fact, lead to further Islamization of the country's political institutions and a stricter application of Sharia legislation. The Sultan is believed to be the main force behind the security and stability of the country; he is ageing and reports have indicated that his health is deteriorating. Thus, if his influence ceases, the country might fall into the hands of radical Muslims. Furthermore, the situation in Yemen or the Qatari crisis might also eventually affect the country. On the other hand, there is also the positive trend in the country of the government trying to develop a culture of religious harmony. The al-Amana Center works to promote dialogue and understanding between Muslims and Christians on the premise: "No peace among the nations without peace among the religions" and "No peace among the religions without dialogue between the religions".

Judging by what is currently happening, the following scenarios are possible for the future:

- If the Sultan dies, the transition period might prove to be one of uncertainty and conflict.
- If the civil war in Yemen is not halted, it could have an impact on Oman, with radical militants and refugees crossing the border from Yemen.

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<sup>18</sup> See: Amnesty International, Amnesty International Report 2016/17, p. 283. The *kafala* system requires all unskilled laborers to have an in-country sponsor, usually their employer, who is responsible for their visa and legal status.

- Although Oman is not directly involved in the Qatari crisis, it could be affected if the regional tension continues unabated or even increases, as it is already affecting the cooperation of the Gulf countries within the Gulf Cooperation Council.

## Policy considerations

Open Doors recommends:

- The Oman government and international community should support and engage with the work of the al-Amana Center, which is influential for establishing peace and stability in the region.
- The government of Oman should develop a plan for dealing with radical Islamic militants who may cross the border from war-torn Yemen.
- The government should be requested to give the necessary protection to domestic workers, some of whom are Christians.
- The government should end all forms of discrimination in law and practice that Christians face in the country, thereby ensuring equal civil and legal rights for residents from all religions and ethnicities.
- The government should repeal the family law that denies a father who has left Islam custodian rights, as it is incompatible with international standards on Freedom of Religion or Belief.

## WWR in-depth reports

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

## Open Doors article(s) from the region

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

## World Watch Monitor news articles

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



## Recent country developments

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

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