



TAJIKISTAN: Country Dossier

May 2018



OpenDoors

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

Open Doors International / World Watch Research Unit

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World Watch List 2018

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

WWL 2018 Persecution Watch 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.

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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.

TAJIKISTAN		
World Watch List	Score	Rank
WWL 2018	65	22
WWL 2017	58	35
WWL 2016	58	31
WWL 2015	50	45
WWL 2014	47	45

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 TAJIKISTAN

Link for general background information:

BBC country profile: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-16201032>

Recent country history

Tajikistan gained its independence during the breakup of the Soviet Union on 9 September 1991 and promptly fell into civil war from 1992–1997 between old-guard forces and Islamists loosely organized as the United Tajik Opposition (UTO). Other armed groups that flourished in the chaos simply reflected the breakdown of central authority rather than loyalty to a political faction. By 1997, the Tajik government and the UTO successfully negotiated a power-sharing peace accord and implemented it by 2000.

Prior to the overthrow of the Taliban in 2001, the civil war in Afghanistan effected border areas and threatened to destabilize Tajikistan's fragile and hard-won peace. In 1999 and 2000, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan used Tajikistan as a platform for attacks against the government of Uzbekistan. At the same time, Taliban advances in northern Afghanistan threatened to inundate Tajikistan with thousands of refugees. A constant flow of illegal narcotics continues to transit Tajikistan from Afghanistan on its way to Russian and European markets.

In 2010, there were concerns among Tajik officials that radical Islamic militancy in the east of the country was on the rise. Fighting against militants erupted again in July 2012, and again in 2015 when Russia sent troops in to assist. The government is currently worried by the possible return of hundreds of Tajiks who went abroad to fight for the Islamic State group and other militant groups.

The religious landscape

Tajikistan is the Central Asian country with the highest percentage of Muslims: According to the World Christian Database (WCD, May 2017) 97.5% of the population is Muslim – predominantly Sunni. However, it would be wrong to call Tajikistan a Muslim country. 70 years of atheism during the Soviet era have left a deep influence and the government (the heirs of the atheist Soviets) is staunchly secular and keeps Islam firmly under strict control. The population merely follows Islamic culture rather than strict Islamic teachings. However, Tajikistan has had experience with radical Islamic groups like the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and Hizb-ut-Tahrir, and hundreds of Tajiks have joined these groups, as well as going off to fight for the Islamic State group (IS) in Syria and Iraq.

According to WCD, the second largest religious category in Tajikistan is non-religious/atheist. They can be found primarily in the capital Dushanbe and other major cities. This is the result of 70 years of forced atheism by the government of the USSR from 1917 to 1991.

Christians are a very small group; they make up only 0.7% of the population. The overwhelming majority (72.51%) of them are Russian Orthodox (i.e. ethnic Russians). 25.9% belong to non-traditional Christian communities. As in many other countries in Central Asia Christian numbers are shrinking due to the emigration of Russians. This is not compensated by the increase in numbers of converts to Christianity, who number about 3,000. They experience huge pressure) from family, friends and the local community to return to the faith of their ancestors, believing that a true Tajik can only be Muslim.

One of the major problems for Christians in Tajikistan (and the other countries in Central Asia) is the fact that there is little cooperation and much division between the various denominations. Unfortunately there are but few exceptions to this and it plays into the hands of the government.

The political landscape

Tajikistan is a presidential republic, whereby the president is both head of state and head of government. Legislative power is vested in both the executive branch and the two chambers of parliament. Emomali Rahmon has held the office of President of Tajikistan since 1992. President Rahmon, a former collective farm chairman, secured another seven-year term with more than 80% of the vote following presidential elections held in late 2013. Parliament is dominated by Rahmon's National Democratic Party of Tajikistan. The only legal faith-based opposition party in post-Soviet Central Asia, the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT), was banned in August 2015.

A new religion law was implemented in August 2011 prohibiting all religious youth work to citizens under 18 years of age. This had a huge impact on the Church since it is believed that youth form about 50% of all Christians. In a speech on 19 March 2015, President Rahmon said his country must "be mainly focused on the development of secularism and national and secular thinking". The stress on secularism was aimed against the IRPT and against Islamic militants fighting both in the Middle East and also in Central Asia. In January 2016 the country's constitution was amended to enable President Rahmon to establish a presidential dynasty (source: [Radio Free Europe](http://www.radiofreeeurope.org)).⁴

The socio-economic landscape

Tajikistan is the poorest of all former Soviet Union States since it lacks natural resources like ore, gold, oil and gas. 35.6% of the Tajik population is living below the poverty line. Officially, only 2.5% of the Tajik population has no job, but the actual unemployment figure is much higher. Since the economy is underdeveloped, many Tajiks are forced to work abroad. According to a World Bank study, Tajikistan is the country depending most on remittances by migrant workers in the whole world. The money these migrants are making ensures that about 60% of the population can afford their basic daily needs. Without this money, the country's economy would break down. There are positive effects: While working abroad Tajiks are much more open to outreach by Christians.

⁴ See: <https://www.rferl.org/a/tajikistan-presidential-dynasty-constitutional-amendments/27503530.html>, last accessed July 2017.

Tajikistan is a country that received a high warning ranking in the [2016 Fund for Peace Fragile State Index](#).⁵ This is mainly due to a lack of economic reforms, widespread corruption, economic mismanagement, seasonal power shortages and a huge external debt burden (source: [CIA World Factbook](#)).⁶

Drug trafficking is the major illegal source of income in Tajikistan as it is an important transit country for Afghan narcotics bound for Russian and European markets. Some opium is also produced locally for the domestic market.

Tajikistan is the only Central Asian country where a non-Turkic language and culture prevail. Tajik belongs to the same group of languages as Farsi (Iran) and Dari (Afghanistan), and the Tajik culture closely resembles that of parts of Iran and Afghanistan too. Tajiks do not draw a line between their own literature and general Persian literature, but there is a difference in writing: Farsi uses Arabic lettering, while Tajik uses the Cyrillic alphabet. Due to the old Soviet educational system, practically all Tajik citizens are literate. This offers great opportunities for Christian literature to be read. A Tajik Bible translation has been available since the 1990s.

Concluding remarks

Tajikistan continues to depend on Russia, both economically and militarily. Without Russian assistance, Tajikistan is vulnerable to invasions from Afghanistan. Without the option to move to Russia as migrant workers, many Tajik families would have very little money to live on.

As in other countries in Central Asia, Tajikistan's government is increasingly taking on a dictatorial character. All real political opposition has been banned and the president has more or less succeeded in establishing a dynasty.

WWL 2018: Church History and Facts

How many Christians?

Pop 2017	Christians	Chr%
8,858,000	62,200	0.7

Source: WCD, May 2017

How did Christians get there?

Nestorian missionaries first brought Christianity to the Tajiks during the 6th century and Islam arrived about a century later. The Nestorian Christians (also known as the Church of the East)

⁵ See: <http://fundforpeace.org/fsi/>, last accessed July 2017.

⁶ See: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ti.html>, last accessed July 2017.

lived side-by-side with the Muslims until Timur Lenk (a.k.a. Tamar Lane) eradicated Christianity from his empire in the 14th century.

Christianity returned to Tajikistan at the end of the 19th century when the Russian Empire conquered the mountainous region. Between 1864 and 1885 Russia gradually took control of the entire territory of Russian Turkestan, the Tajikistan portion of which had been controlled by the Emirate of Bukhara and Khanate of Kokand. It should be noted that only the Russian rulers were Christians - there were no known Tajik Christians at the time.

Under Joseph Stalin many Russians, Germans, Ukrainians, Belarusians and Poles that were deemed unreliable were sent to Tajikistan in the 1930s. This meant a huge growth in the number of Christians in Tajikistan.

What church networks exist today? ⁷

Orthodox	Catholic	Protestant	Independent	Unaffiliated	Double-aff	Evangelical	Renewalist
45,100	220	10,000	6,100	710	-	2,200	6,100

Source: WCD, May 2017

The communities of expatriate Christians are small – they consist of Russians, Americans, Koreans, and other nationalities. Many are involved in community projects helping young people, prisoners, drug addicts and women in difficult situations.

The historical Christian communities are by far the largest group of Christians - more than 92% of all Christians – in Tajikistan. The biggest denomination in this group is the Russian Orthodox Church. Other denominations are the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran church (mostly German).

The communities of converts to Christianity are very small. Christians from a Muslim background experience a great deal of pressure from family, friends and community. Open Doors does not have statistics available concerning the number of converts. However, according to Operation World 2010 there are about 1,000 Tajik believers, while the US State Department noted in its 2006 report that there are about 3,000. Most of them now attend non-traditional Protestant churches, many of them being home fellowships.

The non-traditional Christian communities are also small, but they are the most active in outreach. Their numbers have increased over the past 25 years through ministry both among

⁷ **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.

existing Christians (the majority) and the Muslim population. In all, Christians in this category number a few thousand.

Religious context (selection)

Christian	Muslim	Hindu	Buddhist	Ethno-religionist	Jewish	Bahai	Atheist & others ⁸
62,200	8,634,000	-	5,300	7,800	1,200	3,700	140,900

Source: WCD, May 2017

According to the [2010 census](#)⁹ Tajiks form 84.3% of Tajikistan's population, Uzbeks 13.8%, Kyrgyz 0.8%, Russians 0.5%, and 0.7% others.

According to World Christian Database, 97.5% of the population is Muslim. Tajik culture has been dominated by Islam (approximately 90% of the population are Sunni) ever since Arab traders brought the religion to the country in the 7th century. Under the Soviet Union (1917-1991) Communist ideology promoted atheism, but since 1991 Tajikistan has seen a marked increase in religious practice. Since 2009, the Hanafi school of Sunni Islam is the official religion in Tajikistan. Tajikistan is the only former Soviet state with an official religion.

Most Christians belong to ethnic minorities - mainly Russian. The number of Christians decreased sharply in the 1990's due to the wave of emigration from Tajikistan in the early independence period.

Notes on the current situation

- Starting in 2011, Tajikistan began introducing far-reaching restrictions on the freedom of religion. In August 2011 a new law was implemented that prohibits persons under the age of 18 from participating in public religious activities. This is a big problem for the churches since more than 50% of all Christians are in this category. Another law, dating from July 2012, prohibits Tajik citizens from going abroad to receive religious education, preach, teach or to establish ties with foreign religious organizations.
- In January 2016 the country's constitution was amended so that President Emomali Rahmon could establish a presidential dynasty. Thus, Rahmon, a 64-year-old former collective-farm head who has ruled Tajikistan since 1992, would be able to run for re-election an indefinite number of times.
- During 2015, police in Tajikistan shaved the beards of almost 13,000 men, closed more than 160 shops selling traditional Muslim ware and convinced over 1,700 women to stop wearing head-scarves in a bid to fight against "foreign influences" (source: [Christian Today](#)).¹⁰

⁸ This category includes Atheists, Agnostics and New religionists.

⁹ See: http://www.stat.tj/en/img/526b8592e834fcaaccec26a22965ea2b_1355502192.pdf, last accessed November 2017.

¹⁰ See: <https://www.christiantoday.com/article/tajikistan-shaves-13000-mens-beards-in-fight-against-radicalism/77321.htm>, last accessed November 2017.

WWL 2018: Short & Simple Persecution Profile

Reporting period: 1 November 2016 - 31 October 2017

WWL 2018 Points: 65 / Position: 22

WWL 2017 Points: 58 / Position: 35

WWL 2016 Points: 58 / Position: 31

Where persecution comes from

Most of the persecution of Christians in Tajikistan comes from government officials at various levels – ranging from the country’s central government that imposes restrictive legislation to local authorities and police who raid religious meetings, detain believers and confiscate religious materials. Another source of persecution comes from the Muslim environment (family, friends, community and local imams) that object to Christians evangelizing among Muslims.

How Christians are suffering

All Christian communities are experiencing some form of persecution. Russian Orthodox churches experience the least problems from the government as they do not usually attempt to make contact with the Tajik population. It is the indigenous Christians with a Muslim background who are bearing the brunt of persecution both at the hands of the state and from family, friends and community.

The government puts heavy pressure on all “deviating” groups, including Christians. By tightening already existing laws and by enforcing them strictly, the government is putting additional pressure on the Christian minority. The youth law in particular has left Christians (and other affected religious minorities) in legal limbo as it is not obvious what is allowed and what is denied by law. In recent months the government has become much more like other repressive Central Asian governments – therefore, the situation for Christians is expected to worsen in the future. The pressure from the social environment (mostly on converts) will remain stable.

Examples ¹¹

- In February 2017 the authorities began a series of raids on congregations belonging to the Sunmin Sunbogym (Good News of Grace) Protestant Church in the northern Sogd region, confiscating Christian songbooks and other literature
- On 10 April 2017 the secret police arrested Pastor Bakhrom Kholmatov of the Sunmin Sunbogym congregation in the regional capital Khujand. He remains in secret police custody, apparently under investigation on criminal charges of "extremism".

¹¹ Source: Forum 18: http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2276, last accessed November 2017.

- In 2017, officials in Dushanbe closed down two nursery schools. One was closed after officials found a Christian songbook, the other apparently because Protestants were employed there.

WWL 2018: Persecution Dynamics

Reporting period: 1 November 2016 - 31 October 2017

WWL 2018 Points: 65 / Position: 22

WWL 2017 Points: 58 / Position: 35

WWL 2016 Points: 58 / Position: 31

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Position on World Watch List (WWL)

With a score of 65 points, Tajikistan ranks 22 on WWL 2018, an increase of 7 points compared to WWL 2017. Pressure is very high in all *Spheres of life* and the violence score increased by 2,4 points from a low to high score level. The Tajik government under President Emomali Rahmon has tightened religious freedom in legislation and has increased the level of surveillance of religious communities. The number of violent incidents (e.g. police raids, confiscation of religious materials, detentions, interrogations and physical violence) increased. The decision not to include isolated communities of expatriate Christians as a separate category in the WWL analysis gives a better representation of the country situation, but also contributed to the rise in score.

Persecution engines

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

Dictatorial paranoia (Very strong):

No religious activities beyond state-run and state-controlled institutions are allowed. Pressure from the authorities has been stepped up since 2015; there have been more raids on meetings, and believers have been interrogated. It is very common that members of any Protestant church are regarded as followers of an alien sect with only one goal, namely to spy on and destroy the current political system. From this perspective they need to be not only controlled, but if necessary, even eradicated. Another area of crackdown involves religious education, no matter what religion is concerned.

Islamic oppression (Strong):

If indigenous citizens (who are Muslim) convert to Christianity, they are likely to experience pressure and occasionally physical violence from their families, friends and local community to force them to return to their former faith. Some converts are locked up by their families for long periods, beaten and may eventually be expelled from their communities. Local mullahs preach against them, so adding pressure. As a result, converts will do their best to hide their faith – they become so-called secret believers.

Drivers of persecution

Drivers of persecution in Tajikistan	Level of influence
Government officials at any level from local to national	Very Strong
Ethnic group leaders	Very Weak
Non-Christian religious leaders at any level from local to national	Medium
Christian religious leaders at any level from local to national	Not at all
Violent religious groups	Very Weak
Ideological pressure groups	Not at all
Normal citizens (people from the general public), including mobs	Medium
Own (extended) family	Very Strong
Political parties at any level from local to national	Strong
Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups	Not at all

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.

Organized crime cartels or networks	Very Weak
Multilateral organizations (e.g. UN) and embassies	Not at all

Government officials and *Political parties* are the drivers that can be linked directly with the persecution engine *Dictatorial paranoia*. They form the oppression that comes from the authorities. The *Extended family*, *non-Christian religious leaders* and *Normal citizens* are the drivers that can be connected to the oppression of the Islamic environment especially on converts to Christianity. These drivers are linked with the persecution engine *Islamic oppression*.

Context

Tajikistan is the only Central Asian country with a Persian national language; culturally Tajikistan has more affinity with Iran and Afghanistan than the other countries in Central Asia. Tajikistan is one of the poorest countries in the region and relies heavily on remittances – an estimated 20% of the whole population work in Russia and Kazakhstan. On the positive side, these remittances ensure that about 60% of the population can cover their daily needs; on the negative side, there is a high social cost as families are torn apart and children are growing up with few male relatives.

Tajikistan shares a 1,200-kilometer (750-mile) frontier with Afghanistan. This has several repercussions: a) there is a huge flow of drugs from Afghanistan via Tajikistan to the West; b) Tajiks (also living in Afghanistan) are involved in Islamic fighting; c) What happens across the border has great impact on Tajikistan. Now that most Western troops have withdrawn from Afghanistan, Tajikistan has sought help from Russia. They have offered the use of military bases in exchange for border control by Russian soldiers.

On 1 March 2015 parliamentary elections were held in Tajikistan. Until then Tajikistan was the only country in the region that had a recognized political opposition party – a religiously based one: the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT). Soon after the elections, which were as expected won by the supporters of President Emomali Rahmon, a distinct shift occurred in the country. Within a few months the IRPT was banned. More and more restrictive legislation was imposed - including on matters of religion. Tajikistan can now be considered to be much more in line with the other dictatorial regimes in Central Asia.

Christians are not the only believers persecuted by the government. Muslims, Jews, Jehovah's Witnesses all experience similar pressure. All religious activities are under surveillance.

Christian communities and how they are affected

Communities of expatriate Christians:

These are not involuntarily isolated groups and so have not been counted as a separate category in WWL analysis.

Historical Christian communities:

These groups, the largest of which is the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), are not involved in evangelism among Tajiks. They can function pretty normally as the Tajik regime does not consider them a threat. What is more, the Tajik government has no interest in provoking Russia by attacking the ROC.

Communities of converts to Christianity:

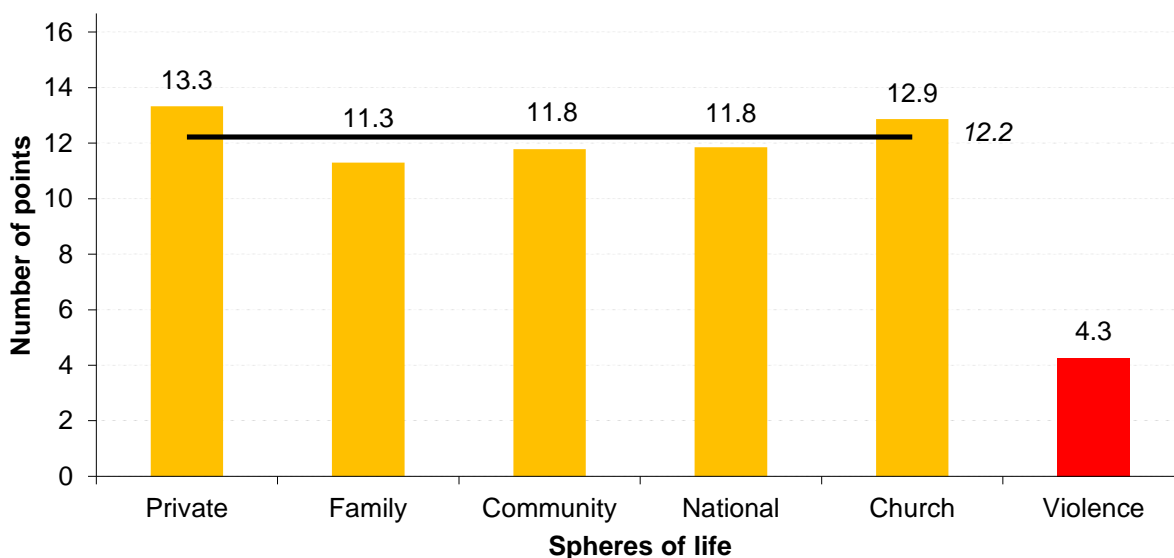
Christian converts with a Muslim background bear the brunt of persecution in Tajikistan. Apart from limited restrictions from the state, they are also under strong pressure from family, friends and community. And for them the latter is by far the more powerful. Conversion is seen as ethnic, national, and religious betrayal and brings shame upon the family.

Non-traditional Christian communities:

After converts, this category of Christians is the second most persecuted group (mainly due to active evangelism). Baptist, Evangelical and Pentecostal groups suffer from many raids, threats, arrests, and fines by the authorities.

Pressure in the 5 spheres of life and violence

WWL 2018 Persecution Pattern for Tajikistan



(The maximum score for each block is 16.7)

The WWL 2018 Persecution pattern for Tajikistan shows:

- Taking all *Spheres of life* into consideration, the average pressure on Christians in Tajikistan is 12.2, rising from 11.2 in WWL 2017.

- Pressure is highest in the *Private sphere* (especially for Christians with a Muslim background) with 13.3 points and in the *Church sphere* with 12.9 points. This can be linked directly with the two Persecution engines that are present in Tajikistan: *Islamic oppression* and *Dictatorial paranoia*.
- The score for violence is 4.3 points rising from the low level of 1.9 in WWL 2017. The number of incidents of beatings and police raids etc. increased markedly.

Private sphere:

There is no legal obstacle to conversion, but punishment for conversion is unavoidable, especially from family members. Conducting acts of Christian worship privately is very risky for converts from Islam and converts are known to have suffered beatings and forced renunciations of faith. Converts usually hide Christian literature and symbols because of possible reprisals within the family, but other Christians must also be careful as owning such literature and displaying Christian symbols can be regarded as a form of evangelism. Converts have to be very careful when accessing Christian radio, television or websites that they are not discovered by their family, friends and community. It is also very risky for converts to talk about their new faith with members of the family and others because the family will do its utmost (sometimes in the form of house arrest) to have converts return to their former faith.

Family sphere:

A person's religious affiliation is not registered in official documents, but occasionally local authorities (run by Muslims from the local community) may obstruct the registration of births, weddings or deaths of converts. Celebrations of a convert's wedding or baptism will also be opposed by family and local community. Since August 2011 any religious activity for persons under the age of 18 has become strictly forbidden. All Christian youth work must now be done in secret and there have been raids on summer camps for children. Children and teens are not allowed to visit Sunday school or receive religious training. Islamic topics are part of the school curriculum and all children are required to attend them. Children of Christians are often humiliated at schools in front of all the other children. Some wives or husbands of converts have been forced to separate because of threats. Christians with a Muslim background may also lose inheritance rights.

Community sphere:

At the community level, converts and Protestants are monitored constantly: Converts experience high levels of pressure (in the form of threats and harassment) to give up their new faith. Protestants need to be very careful in evangelism or they may face violence. Marriages are usually arranged by the parents and female converts run the risk of being kidnapped and married off to a Muslim. For all converts there is pressure to take part in Islamic ceremonies and feasts. At the community level children of converts face problems in education. They are often ridiculed by their teachers and fellow pupils. Known Christians will have far fewer career opportunities, and employment at offices of the local authorities is impossible. Local communities and authorities will also hinder known Christians (and most certainly a convert) from running their own businesses. Paying bribes or protection money is quite common in Tajikistan, but this is not specifically aimed at Christians. Local police regularly interrogate Christians.

National sphere:

The state declares itself to be secular. The Constitution protects religious freedom, but in practice the government enforces policies which restrict religious freedom. Some local and regional leaders create administrative barriers for Christians which can affect the registration of churches. There is no alternative for military service and those refusing end up in prison. A law introduced in July 2012 prohibits Tajik citizens from going abroad in order to receive religious education, to teach or to establish ties with foreign religious organizations. Protestants are barred from working for the government as they are seen as an untrustworthy foreign influence that threatens the Tajik community. Since March 2015 there has been a crackdown on all non-government organizations. Activities related to church ministry, including youth work and the publication of religious materials, have been curtailed and censored by the government. State agents and community members can harass, detain and interrogate Christians with impunity. Christians suffer from biased treatment against them in court cases.

Church sphere:

All Christian activity is monitored. Only registered groups are legally entitled to exist, own a building, hold meetings or own religious materials. Getting registration is extremely difficult and without it a group is illegal and will be raided by police. The August 2011 laws prohibit any youth work. Since youth form about 50% of all believers, this has major consequences. The Council for Religious Affairs must approve sermons as well as religious materials. The religious training of leaders can only be done by registered groups (and these are few). Sometimes, unregistered groups do this under the umbrella of the registered ones. All media are state-controlled and thus inaccessible for Christian input. Internet access is only possible via state providers. The government does not allow Christians to establish their own schools, organizations or institutions, nor do they allow Christian charitable, humanitarian, medical, social or cultural associations. All foreign contacts with domestic religious groups are prohibited as part of the government's crackdown on radical religious activity.

Violence:

At least 3 churches and two schools related to Christian groups were raided by the authorities in the WWL 2018 reporting period. There were doubtless more such incidents - underreporting remains a problem. 4 Christians were briefly detained by the police for distributing literature. Pastor Kholmatov was sentenced to three years' imprisonment in July 2017. An estimated 20 Christians were beaten. Two Christian convert women went into hiding from their Muslim husbands and relatives. One Christian went into hiding from the police, but no Christians were forced to leave Tajikistan.

Examples:

- In February 2017 the authorities began a series of raids on congregations belonging to the Sunmin Sunbogym (Good News of Grace) Protestant Church in the northern Sogd region, confiscating Christian songbooks and other literature. On 10 April 2017 the secret police arrested Pastor Bakhrom Kholmatov of the Sunmin Sunbogym

congregation in the regional capital Khujand. He remains in secret police custody, apparently under investigation on criminal charges of "extremism" (source: [Forum 18](#)).¹³

- This year (2017), officials in Dushanbe have closed down two nursery schools. One was closed after officials found a Christian songbook, the other apparently because Protestants were employed there (source: [Forum 18](#)).¹⁴
- On 20 July 2017 [Forum 18](#) reported that Pastor Bakhrom Kholmatov of Khujand's Sunmin Sunbogym (Full Gospel) Protestant Church had been [jailed](#) for three years.¹⁵ The 42-year-old prisoner of conscience Kholmatov, who is married with three children, was first held in NSC secret police custody after his 10 April arrest. While on trial he was held in a police detention centre, and he has since been moved to an unknown prison.

Gender profile of persecution

Female:

In Tajikistan the daily life of indigenous people is based on Islamic culture which puts women in an inferior position compared to men. Total submission is expected from women to their parents and if married - to their husbands. This makes them more vulnerable to persecution - both as Christians and as women who challenge the existing order. The state authorities in Tajikistan prohibit the use of religious clothes or symbols, also by female believers. In the case of Islamic women, the hijab is also prohibited. Among some Baptists and Pentecostal groups married women traditionally cover their head with a headscarf. This headscarf is different to the one used by Muslim women, but potentially, it could also become a case for arrest. No cases have yet been reported, however.

Male:

Church leaders are normally men, and men are also normally the head of their family and the main bread winner. When a Christian man becomes a target of persecution (e.g. fined or imprisoned), his whole family will suffer. Losing jobs and income will affect the whole family. If a man is a church leader his persecution will affect his church and cause fear. Persecution from the state includes raids, searches, detention, interrogation, confiscation, fines and imprisonment. When detained by police, Christian men suffer verbal and physical abuse, threats, beatings, and pressure to become an informer. At the hands of the local community, Christian men can lose their jobs and suffer beatings, threats, verbal and physical abuse, discrimination, ostracization, and pressure on the family members. At the hands of his own family, a Christian with a Muslim background may face beatings, threats, home detention, verbal and physical abuse, humiliation, excommunication and divorce.

Future outlook

The government puts heavy pressure on all "deviating" groups, including Christians. By tightening already existing laws and by enforcing them strictly, the government is putting additional pressure on the Christian minority. The youth law in particular has left Christians

¹³ See: http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2276, last accessed November 2017.

¹⁴ Id.

¹⁵ See: http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2298, last accessed November 2017.

(and other affected religious minorities) in legal limbo as it is not obvious what is allowed and what is denied by law. The regime has recently become much more like other repressive Central Asian governments – therefore, the situation for Christians is expected to worsen in the future. The pressure from the social environment (mostly on converts from Islam) will remain stable.

Policy considerations

Open Doors recommends that the government of Tajikistan be encouraged to honor all its OSCE commitments to Freedom of Religion or Belief through full implementation in all legislation and practice. This includes:

- Cooperating fully with the OSCE and international community to develop a human rights-based approach to countering violent extremism and terrorism, in line with its commitment to interfaith, interreligious and intercultural dialogue and to counter manifestations of intolerance and discrimination on the basis of religion or belief. (Ministerial Declaration on Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism and Radicalization that lead to Terrorism, Belgrade 2015).
- A full revision of the 2009 Religion Law, with full public consultation and parliamentary debate, removing articles requiring state permission for all exercise of Freedom of Religion or Belief.
- The removal of all articles providing for sanctions and punishment for religious teaching, education and activity from the Administrative Code (July 2012), and revision of the language to remove all ambiguities concerning Freedom of Religion or Belief.
- Full revision of the youth law which leaves Christians and other affected religious minorities in legal limbo due to the ambiguities in what is allowed or denied by law.
- Legal provisions and monitoring to ensure that all citizens receive a fair trial and legal representation in court cases (with no exemption of or discrimination against religious minorities).

WWR in-depth reports

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

- [Central Asia – The State and Islam – 2016](#)

June 2016

This report offers a broad regional and historic overview and a brief synopsis of the situation in each of the five nations in Central Asia. It concludes with a regional summary of the effect on Christians and threats for the future.

- Central Asia/Caucasus – Growing Islamic Extremism – Situation and Outlook – reissued 2015

Re-issued 2015

This report offers a study of Islamism in the Central Asian region through three-dimensional (macro, meso and micro) lenses on different levels – (1) history; (2) politics, security and socio-economic factors; and (3) culture and religion.

Open Doors article(s) from the region

There are currently no Open Doors articles on Tajikistan 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/tajikistan/>

- Tajikistan’s new Religion Law ‘represents total control’
21 February 2018
The amendments to the 2009 Religion Law, which came into force in January 2018, give the state greater control over religious education, and increase the amount of information religious organisations have to pass on to the state.
- Tajikistan pastor jailed for singing religious songs ends appeal
12 December 2017
A Protestant pastor serving three years in prison for “singing extremist songs in church and so inciting religious hatred” has chosen to make no more appeals against his sentence.
- Tajik pastor placed in solitary confinement in prison 350km from home
25 October 2017
A Tajik Protestant church leader serving a three-year sentence for “singing extremist songs in church and so inciting religious hatred” has been moved to a prison 350km from his home and placed in solitary confinement.
- Tajikistan: three-year sentence for pastor for ‘singing extremist songs’
27 July 2017
Bakhrom Kholmatov, 42, has been sentenced under Criminal Code Article 189 for “inciting national, racial, local or religious hatred or dissension, humiliation of national dignity, as well as propaganda of the superiority of citizens based on their religion, national, racial, or local origin, if committed in public or using the mass media”.

- [Trial ‘imminent’ for Tajikistan pastor, on unspecified charges](#)

4 July 2017

Kholmatov was arrested during a raid on the Good News of Grace Protestant church in the northern city of Khujand on 10 April 2017 by the secret police). Meanwhile, on 11 June law enforcement agents raided a Baptist church in the Tajikistan capital, Dushanbe, filmed the congregation and recorded their personal details, before threatening them with criminal prosecution.

Recent country developments

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

- [Tajikistan: Government increases grip on the country](#)

15 October 2017

Six million mobile phone users in Tajikistan received text messages in September 2017 from a Government office telling them to wear traditional Tajik clothing. The government seeks to suppress Islamic clothing as part of measures aimed at countering Islamic militancy.

- [Tajikistan: Further restrictions on religious materials](#)

3 May 2017

Tajikistan’s Culture Ministry recently announced that no books were to be allowed in or out of the country without written permission. Some observers believe these new restrictions are aimed at stopping the dissemination of extremist religious material.

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