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## Afghanistan: Country Dossier

February 2020 update



**OpenDoors**

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

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# Introduction

## World Watch List 2020

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2020	Total Score WWL 2019	Total Score WWL 2018	Total Score WWL 2017	Total Score WWL 2016
1	North Korea	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	11.1	94	94	94	92	92
2	Afghanistan	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	10.0	93	94	93	89	88
3	Somalia	16.5	16.7	16.6	16.6	16.5	9.4	92	91	91	91	87
4	Libya	15.3	15.5	15.8	16.0	16.4	11.3	90	87	86	78	79
5	Pakistan	14.0	13.9	15.0	14.9	13.7	16.7	88	87	86	88	87
6	Eritrea	14.5	14.9	15.9	15.9	15.4	10.9	87	86	86	82	89
7	Sudan	14.2	14.6	14.5	15.7	16.1	10.4	85	87	87	87	84
8	Yemen	16.6	16.4	16.4	16.7	16.7	2.6	85	86	85	85	78
9	Iran	14.1	14.3	14.1	15.8	16.5	10.4	85	85	85	85	83
10	India	12.9	13.0	13.5	15.0	13.5	14.8	83	83	81	73	68
11	Syria	13.5	14.2	13.0	13.9	14.4	12.6	82	82	76	86	87
12	Nigeria	12.2	11.9	13.5	12.8	13.0	16.7	80	80	77	78	78
13	Saudi Arabia	15.1	14.9	14.1	15.5	16.5	2.4	79	77	79	76	76
14	Maldives	15.4	15.6	14.0	15.9	16.6	0.7	78	78	78	76	76
15	Iraq	14.0	14.6	13.9	14.5	13.6	5.6	76	79	86	86	90
16	Egypt	12.1	13.1	10.7	13.2	10.5	16.1	76	76	70	65	64
17	Algeria	13.5	14.3	10.4	12.8	13.2	9.3	73	70	58	58	56
18	Uzbekistan	15.1	12.9	14.1	12.2	15.7	3.0	73	74	73	71	70
19	Myanmar	11.8	11.9	13.5	12.5	12.2	10.7	73	71	65	62	62
20	Laos	12.8	9.9	14.1	14.4	14.9	5.6	72	71	67	64	58
21	Vietnam	12.3	8.5	12.9	13.6	14.5	9.8	72	70	69	71	66
22	Turkmenistan	14.5	11.2	13.8	13.3	15.7	1.9	70	69	68	67	66
23	China	11.6	8.4	11.6	12.8	15.1	10.2	70	65	57	57	57
24	Mauritania	13.9	14.0	13.0	13.7	13.4	0.2	68	67	57	55	50
25	Central African Republic	10.1	9.1	13.1	9.8	10.2	15.6	68	70	61	58	59
26	Morocco	12.4	13.3	10.8	11.7	14.1	4.1	66	63	51	49	47
27	Qatar	13.6	13.4	10.8	12.2	14.1	2.2	66	62	63	66	65
28	Burkina Faso	9.4	9.7	10.2	9.4	11.8	15.6	66	48	-	-	-
29	Mali	9.2	8.2	12.8	10.0	11.7	13.7	66	68	59	59	55
30	Sri Lanka	11.5	9.0	11.0	10.9	9.6	13.1	65	58	57	55	53
31	Tajikistan	13.9	12.3	11.9	12.4	13.1	1.1	65	65	65	58	58
32	Nepal	12.4	10.8	9.9	12.1	12.2	7.0	64	64	64	53	53
33	Jordan	13.1	14.1	10.7	11.7	12.5	1.7	64	65	66	63	59
34	Tunisia	12.0	12.8	10.3	10.8	12.3	5.4	64	63	62	61	58
35	Kazakhstan	13.2	11.5	10.7	12.4	14.0	1.7	64	63	63	56	55

36	Turkey	12.6	11.8	10.7	13.3	11.3	3.7	63	66	62	57	55
37	Brunei	13.8	14.3	10.7	10.3	13.5	0.6	63	63	64	64	61
38	Bangladesh	11.1	9.9	12.7	11.1	8.9	9.3	63	58	58	63	57
39	Ethiopia	10.0	9.2	10.6	10.8	10.4	11.9	63	65	62	64	67
40	Malaysia	12.1	14.6	12.7	12.0	9.6	1.5	62	60	65	60	58
41	Colombia	8.9	7.8	11.9	9.8	8.9	15.0	62	58	56	53	55
42	Oman	12.7	13.1	10.0	11.5	12.7	2.0	62	59	57	53	53
43	Kuwait	13.2	13.1	9.9	11.5	13.4	0.7	62	60	61	57	56
44	Kenya	11.7	10.5	10.9	8.3	10.9	9.1	61	61	62	68	68
45	Bhutan	12.8	10.9	11.8	11.6	13.9	0.0	61	64	62	61	56
46	Russian Federation	12.2	8.3	10.7	10.4	12.1	6.9	60	60	51	46	48
47	United Arab Emirates	12.9	13.0	9.5	11.1	12.6	1.1	60	58	58	55	55
48	Cameroon	8.8	7.2	11.6	7.0	10.4	15.0	60	54	38	-	45
49	Indonesia	10.9	11.1	11.6	10.2	9.5	6.5	60	65	59	55	55
50	Niger	9.4	9.5	13.3	7.2	11.1	9.3	60	52	45	47	53
51	Palestinian Territories	12.2	13.0	9.2	10.2	11.9	3.1	60	57	60	64	62
52	Mexico	8.4	6.8	12.2	10.6	10.0	11.5	60	61	59	57	56
53	Azerbaijan	13.0	10.0	9.3	11.1	12.4	1.5	57	57	57	52	57
54	Comoros	11.7	11.5	9.1	9.9	13.9	0.9	57	56	56	56	56
55	Kyrgyzstan	12.9	10.3	11.1	9.4	11.9	1.1	57	56	54	48	46
56	Djibouti	12.3	12.3	10.3	10.0	11.2	0.2	56	56	56	57	58
57	Democratic Republic of the Congo	5.6	6.7	10.6	7.4	10.4	15.6	56	55	33	-	53
58	Chad	11.5	8.2	10.2	9.6	10.3	5.9	56	48	40	-	51
59	Bahrain	12.1	12.3	9.1	10.1	10.5	0.9	55	55	57	54	54
60	Tanzania	9.3	10.8	10.3	8.6	8.7	7.0	55	52	53	59	57
61	Cuba	9.6	5.6	9.5	11.8	12.0	3.5	52	49	49	47	42
62	Uganda	8.1	4.6	6.7	6.7	9.1	13.0	48	47	46	53	45
63	Burundi	5.1	5.8	9.7	9.2	9.6	8.7	48	43	-	-	-
64	Guinea	10.3	7.5	8.3	7.0	8.1	3.7	45	46	-	-	-
65	South Sudan	5.7	1.5	7.0	6.3	7.8	15.6	44	44	-	-	-
66	Mozambique	6.9	4.6	7.1	5.2	8.0	11.7	43	43	-	-	-
67	Gambia	8.3	8.2	8.7	8.3	8.8	1.1	43	43	-	-	-
68	Angola	6.4	3.6	7.0	8.7	10.4	6.7	43	42	-	-	-
69	Venezuela	3.8	4.4	10.6	9.3	9.5	4.8	42	41	34	-	-
70	Ivory Coast	9.8	8.6	8.2	5.5	6.6	3.5	42	43	-	-	-
71	Rwanda	5.3	4.4	6.7	7.8	10.1	7.2	42	41	-	-	-
72	Nicaragua	5.8	4.2	8.5	9.8	9.0	4.1	41	41	-	-	-
73	Togo	8.6	6.7	8.5	7.1	8.4	1.1	41	42	-	-	-

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## Brief note on sources and definitions

This country report is a collation of data and analysis based around Open Doors World Watch List (WWL) and includes statistical information on world religions, Christian denominations and people groups prepared by the World Christian Database (WCD). The highlighted links in the text can be found written out in full at the conclusion of each main section under the heading “External links”. The WWL 2020 reporting period was 1 November 2018 - 31 October 2019.

The definition of persecution used in WWL analysis is: “Any hostility experienced as a result of one’s identification with Christ. This can include hostile attitudes, words and actions towards Christians”.

This broad definition includes (but is not limited to) restrictions, pressure, discrimination, opposition, disinformation, injustice, intimidation, mistreatment, marginalization, oppression, intolerance, infringement, violation, ostracism, hostilities, harassment, abuse, violence, ethnic cleansing and genocide.

The latest update of WWL Methodology including appendices can be found on the [World Watch List Documentation](#) page of the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom).

# WWL 2020: Persecution summary / Afghanistan

## Brief country details

The number of Christians listed in the table below is an Open Doors (OD) estimate.

Pop 2019	Christians	Chr%
Afghanistan		
37,209,000	thousands	OD estimate

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2019).

World Watch List Afghanistan	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2020	93	2
WWL 2019	94	2
WWL 2018	93	2
WWL 2017	89	3
WWL 2016	88	4

Scores and ranks are shown above whenever the country scored 41 points or more in the WWL 2016-2020 reporting periods.

## Dominant persecution engines and drivers

Afghanistan: Main Persecution engines	Main drivers
Clan and ethnic antagonism	Government officials , Ethnic group leaders, Non-Christian religious leaders, Violent religious groups, One's own (extended) family, Political parties, Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs
Islamic oppression	Government officials , Ethnic group leaders, Non-Christian religious leaders, Violent religious groups, Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs, One's own (extended) family, Political parties
Organized corruption and crime	Organized crime cartels or networks

Engines and Drivers are listed in order of strength. Only Very strong / Strong / Medium are shown here.

## Brief description of persecution situation

All Afghan Christians are converts from Islam and are not able to live their faith openly. Leaving Islam is considered shameful and Christian converts face dire consequences if exposed: Either they have to flee the country or they will be killed. The family, clan or tribe has to save its 'honor' by disposing of the Christian. Neither radical Islamic groups nor a convert's extended family show mercy in this respect. However, since converts are considered insane to leave Islam, some may end up in a psychiatric hospital.

## Specific examples of persecution in the reporting period

There are reports that several Christians have been killed in the WWL 2020 reporting period, but for security reasons no details can be published.

Any visible acts of Christian worship are dangerous. As all religious 'changes' are noticed and reported, this often means that converts have to relocate; neighborhood pressure and the influence of the Taliban and Islamic State group is strong. If found even exploring any faith other than Islam (and especially if suspected of having converted), the penalty can be death and it depends on the family situation what the consequences are. Christians will be employed as long as it is believed they are Afghan Muslims. If it is discovered that they are even only exploring Christianity (e.g. via websites in the internet), immediate action is taken to re-indoctrinate them until they and (any group involved) comply. This can mean torture.



# WWL 2020: Keys to understanding / Afghanistan

## Link for general background information

See BBC country profile: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-south-asia-12011352>.

## Recent history

In 1996 the Taliban seized control of Kabul and imposed radical Sharia law until 2001 when they were ousted from power by the US-led international military invasion. In 2004 Hamid Karzai won the first presidential elections and in 2005 the first parliamentary elections were held for more than 30 years. In 2014 NATO formally ended its combat mission in Afghanistan. However, international troops continue to be based in the country and, following an announcement by the USA in 2017, numbers have been increased. Talks between the US government and the Taliban collapsed in September 2019.

Elections in 2014 led to a political stand-off, which could only be solved when the former foreign minister and ethnic Tajik, Abdullah Abdullah, acknowledged his defeat and accepted Ashraf Ghani as the new president. Abdullah was then announced CEO of the country, a position nowhere to be found in the Afghan constitution. This compromise was called the "National Unity Government". This government proved to be shaky, inconsistent and challenged in multiple ways, but managed to survive. Presidential elections were held on 28 September 2019, but the outcome is inconclusive, the announcement of results has been postponed several times and the voter turnout was low. There have again been many allegations of fraud and manipulations. Until the time of the final edit of this dossier, end of November, no official numbers have been published.

The parliamentary elections which took place on 20 October 2018 did not change the status quo. They were challenged by internal and external factors: A short-term decision to use biometric voter identification systems led to many technical problems and there were attacks by the Taliban.

Afghanistan has not known peace for more than forty years. In the short-term, it is unlikely that the situation in the country will become any calmer since the strength of the Taliban insurgency is increasing. Willingness for the group to be a partner in a future peace agreement is also growing.

## Political and legal landscape

Competing factions of radical Islamic groups as well as a weak and divided government (despite its name "National Unity Government") do not bode well for the future of the country. Divisions in the government became increasingly evident as the election date in October 2018 came closer. The quick consecutive changes in leadership of several radical Islamic groups (due to targeted killings) has not reduced their ability to execute attacks and harm the government, national army and citizens.

Warlords representing ethnic factions influence the political scene. Even occasional peace accords with warlords – such as the one with the infamous Hekmatyar in September 2016, who is known for his very outspoken hostility towards Christians - will most likely change nothing for the country's security. The same goes for the brief Eid ceasefire between government and Taliban in June 2018. Afghanistan is still the country with the most landmines in the world, the level of crime is increasing, criminal gangs are active in various regions and kidnappings occur frequently.

The Taliban are once again an increasing threat to stability too. The brief capture of Northern Kunduz, at the end of September 2015, was a major blow to the government as it was the first provincial capital to be re-conquered by the Taliban since 2001. It showed as well that the Taliban are not just powerful in their strongholds in the southern province of Helmand. Violent attacks across the country are increasing and civilians are paying the price for it, especially as Islamic State and the Taliban are competing with each other.

In 2019, the USA at first saw timid steps of progress in [negotiating peace](#) with the Taliban, although some major issues were avoided and - on an official level - the newly elected government was also excluded from the talks. It is quite clear that the Taliban would have no real intention of prioritizing issues such as [human and women's rights](#) if they were to return to power, let alone of protecting religious minorities such as Christians, who are not even officially present in the country. Friction between the government and the USA arose when the US negotiators [refused to work](#) with the Afghan National Security Adviser who had allegedly complained that the US Special Envoy was acting like 'a viceroy' in Afghanistan. The intra-Afghan talks made progress with a '[peace dialogue](#)' facilitated by Qatar and Germany in July 2019. However, despite all these signs of progress, peace is still a long way off, especially since US President Trump [announced](#) in September 2019 that the peace negotiations had failed. Efforts to get the talks back on track [will take time](#) and need thorough consideration.

The challenges facing Afghan democracy were clearly shown by the fact that it needed a seven month delay (i.e. not until May 2019) before the Independent Election Commission was in a position to finally publish the [results of the October 2018 parliamentary elections](#) for all but one province. (No elections could be held in Ghazni Province due to security issues.) Afghanistan is facing a volatile and highly violent future, and neither the October 2018 parliamentarian nor the September 2019 presidential elections have brought any real change to the status quo. Although the election process saw several noteworthy [improvements](#), the voter turnout may have been below 20%.

The small Christian community also faces this difficult future. Observers see little chance of a negotiated peace materializing. Even if it did, it is far from clear how disgruntled Taliban fighters, other insurgents and regional warlords could be prevented from continuing fighting. The intra-Afghan meeting in July 2019 between the Taliban, Afghan government members in a private capacity and representatives of civil society was a positive sign, but also showed how any hope of freedom for religious minorities is still far off. This could be seen in the [very passionate](#) nature of the debates; one of the most heated exchanges concerned the question of who has the right and duty to interpret Islam.

The National Unity Government is everything but united and it is hard to see how the elections results can be translated into stability, let alone bring any solutions to the multitude of problems the country is facing, given the political stand-off between different factions and ethnic groups. A good illustration was the difficulty the government experienced in [replacing](#) two provincial governors at the beginning of 2018; the two governors - one a Tajik and the other of Turkmen ethnicity - refused to step down.

## Religious landscape

For security reasons no WCD breakdown is shown here, but according to WCD statistics, more than 99% of the population is Muslim and there also are small groups of Hindus, Bahai, Buddhists and Christians (among others).

Officially there are no Christians in this 99% Muslim state, apart from international military staff, diplomats and NGO workers. Indigenous Christians (mostly those with a Muslim background) are in hiding as much as possible. 90% of Muslims in Afghanistan follow Sunni Islam, while 9.7% adhere to Shiite Islam. The Hazara tribe is predominantly Shiite, while the main ethnic group, the Pashtu, are Sunni. They dominate the political landscape, but are in need of such minorities as the Uzbeks and Tajiks to exercise power.

The small numbers of Sikh, Hindu and Bahai followers in the country hardly have more freedom than Christians do, but their advantage is that they are not perceived as being Western and alien. This does not mean, however, that they are not targeted for attack. In July 2018, the only Sikh candidate for parliamentary elections was killed in a [bomb attack](#). Attacks against the Shiite Hazara have become much more common [since 2018](#).

## Economic landscape

Afghanistan is a land-locked country and, due to decades of civil war, the infrastructure is in poor condition and limited in capacity. The country cannot currently take advantage of its rich mineral resources (most likely including oil and gas as well) as these commodities need foreign investment and safe transportation, which in turn require stability and predictability. Even China, which is commodity-hungry and willing to take more risks than most other investors, remains cautious. One of the main economic problems Afghanistan faces is that illicit drugs like opium are much more lucrative than virtually any other crop. Compared to wheat, farmers can earn three times the amount of money with poppy production. Even when a considerable share has to be paid to Taliban networks, it is still highly profitable. Although recently [dropping](#) in terms of price and areas harvested, the opium trade still makes up around 3% of the equivalent of the country's licit GDP. The Taliban are heavily involved in drug production, estimations are that 70-80% of all drug trafficking gains end up financing Taliban activities. Afghanistan's main opium production hub, the southern province of Helmand, is home to around 50% of the country's area suitable for poppy cultivation and a stronghold of the Taliban.

According to a report published in May 2018, 66% of the Afghan government's budget depends on foreign aid. According to the [UNDP](#), more than 62% of the population is employed in the agricultural sector, the unemployment rate stands at 8.8% (more than double for youth) and almost two thirds of those employed are working under vulnerable conditions. Infrastructure poses a challenge and all efforts to re-establish Afghanistan's old role as [crossroads between Central and South Asia](#) have to go a long way.

## Social and cultural landscape

The two main languages are Pashtu and Dari (a Farsi dialect). The largest ethnolinguistic groups are Pashtun, Tajik, Hazara, Uzbek, Aimak, Turkmen, Baloch and others. The Afghan constitution mentions 14 different ethnic groups.

The country is not only war-torn, but also torn between the different ethnic groups which are strong in different parts of the country. It seems that all are aiming to secure their own position and are not interested in the well-being of Afghanistan as a whole. The Pashtuns are often regarded as being too dominant, but even within the Pashtun community, divisions occur along Pashtun tribal lines as well; President Ghani has been accused of favoring his own Ghilzai tribe, while side-lining the influential Durrani tribe. A well-known Afghani saying states: "First my tribe, then my people and then the country". This attitude leaves the country with rough roads ahead, especially given the weakness of the national security forces. Political cooperation is constantly affected by mistrust and the National Unity Government (forged by international powers in 2014) has been no exception, as was seen in the election campaigning.

The term "civil society" is virtually unknown in Afghanistan, so pressure groups caring for social development and/or issues concerning women, minorities or human rights can do little to influence the country's political development. Groups supporting the rule of law, participation in the political process or government accountability are quickly suspected of being agents of the international community, furthering the agenda of the West. These accusations come from both the government and society in general. This mindset makes it easy for insurgents to mobilize a large segment of the population to oppose "foreign occupiers" who are labeled as "non-believers". This would seem to apply also to Western NGOs working in the country, including the few Christian ones. This attitude within society is echoed in the US State Department's IRF 2018 Country Report, when it states on page 19: "NGOs reported Muslim residents remained suspicious of development assistance projects, which they often viewed as surreptitious efforts to advance Christianity or engage in proselytization." This is one of the reasons why there have been attacks against aid workers.

A [UNICEF country report](#) published in May 2018 showed what the dire situation means for civilians, especially for children: 44% of all children in the age between 7 and 17 are not attending school, 60% of whom are girls. The out-of-school rate has increased for the first time since 2002. It is hard to see how the next generation will have any perspective without education.

According to the report by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction ([SIGAR](#)) published on 12 July 2019, the number of opium consumers within Afghanistan rose to 2.9 – 3.6 million in 2015 - one of the world's highest per capita rates. This also shows that many people, especially the younger generation, lack future perspectives.

It is currently Pakistan (and perhaps also Iran) who holds responsibility for making the situation in Afghanistan even more complicated. The question of what to do about the hundreds of thousands of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) is an urgent issue. However, the sheer number of Afghan [refugees returning from neighboring countries](#) (i.e. from Pakistan and Iran) exacerbates this question; a survey from Asia Foundation published on 31 July 2019, highlights the problems of their re-integration and the provision of economic perspectives. Figures from the Afghan Ministry for Refugees and Repatriation indicate that, by the end of 2018, 3.2 million refugees had already returned, with another 215,000 coming back in the first six months of 2019. But a further estimated 3.6 million refugees in Pakistan and Iran are still likely to return. Although numbers for Afghanistan are always hard to verify, given that the current population of Afghanistan is estimated at 37 million, the refugee problem could involve well over 15% of the population.

## Technological landscape

According to the UNDP, the internet penetration rate in Afghanistan stands at 10.6% which is one of the world's lowest rates of access to the internet. The mobile phone subscription rate is also one of the lowest with 62.3 per hundred people. As Afghanistan Analysts Network showed in a series of reports, [access to telecom services](#) is limited by insurgents' control, above all, by Taliban control. This applies predominantly to rural areas, while it should be noted that the World Bank claims that the [urbanization rate](#) of Afghanistan is the highest in South Asia, only topped by the smaller countries of the Maldives and Bhutan. So the gap between cities and rural areas is growing. Overall, the country's technological development is slow and strongly affected by the dire security situation. Afghanistan is not listed in Freedom House's "Freedom on the Net 2019" report.

## Security situation

Insurgents have intensified their attacks and have control of an increasing number of districts all over the country. This is true even though the US and international forces have been building up their numbers of troops throughout 2018. It seems most likely that Afghanistan is going to see continued attacks and bloodshed. The fact that the International Committee of the Red Cross [withdrew completely from two northern provinces](#) and is reducing its presence in others (as announced in October 2017), is a clear and very worrying sign in this respect. The Taliban shocked both the Afghan government and the international community alike by [taking control of another provincial capital](#), Ghazni, for a few days in August 2018, showing their military power.

The radical Islamic Taliban are ever increasing in strength and their fighting units are present in more regions than in the last few years. Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State group (IS) have also made further inroads into the country and seem [here to stay](#). This even went so far that the Taliban publicly warned IS to stay off their turf in June 2015. Nangarhar Province turned out to be a stronghold for IS, although its actual numbers appear to be relatively small. However, it already poses a serious challenge for national and international security forces and carries out attacks with great brutality. This was acknowledged by US troops dropping its largest ever non-nuclear bomb in 2017 on an IS-hideout, killing at least eighty, many being militants from abroad. IS is reportedly [growing in numbers and power](#) in Afghanistan and the battle against IS has been one of the discussion points in peace talks with the Taliban. The fact that the Taliban is both attending talks and carrying out attacks at one and the same time does not help build trust. Since the announcement in September 2019 confirming that the talks between the US government and the Taliban had failed, the security situation remains as dire as ever and has even deteriorated.

At least half of the country's provinces are either ruled or contested by the Taliban and the security situation looks grimmer than ever due to the influx of foreign Sunni militants, many calling themselves "Islamic State of the Khorasan Province" (ISKP) and formed out of splinter groups of former Taliban fighters. They have mainly targeted Hazara and other Shiites in an effort to sow further sectarian discord. The 2018 report on [civilian casualties](#) in the Afghan conflict was published by UNAMA on 24 February 2019 and it makes depressing reading. But it is not just that the total number of civilian casualties rose to 3,804 deaths and 7,189 people injured - an all-time-high. It is particularly worrying that a militant group such as Islamic State, which is relatively new on the Afghan scene and has lost much of its territorial base elsewhere, has nevertheless increased its share in inflicting casualties and caused a 22% increase in the number of victims from suicide-attacks and similar incidents. The UNAMA report serves as a grim reminder that peace is still far off for Afghanistan, even if common ground with the Taliban can be found.

The most recent UN report on civilian casualties for the first quarter of 2019 shows that forces allied with the government are responsible for the [majority of civilian casualties](#). The number of casualties remains [high](#), as a report published in September 2019, showed. The most recent ["Global Terrorism Index"](#) 2019 featured Afghanistan as the country most affected by terrorism worldwide and the Taliban as the deadliest terror group. As far as can be seen, the Consultative Peace Loya Jirga, held in April 2019 with some 3,000 delegates, did not help in finding peace. Likewise, no peace or the badly needed healing of the torn country can be expected from investigations of the International Criminal Court (ICC). The ICC decided in April 2019 [not to begin proceedings](#) into investigating war crimes and crimes against humanity committed by the Taliban, Afghan and US forces over the last two decades. This adds to the disappointment of the war victims and to the boldness of the perpetrators.

## Trends analysis

Life for most Afghans is a constant balancing act with little hope for improvement and an ever increasing level of insecurity. Even though Kabul is regarded as the most stable zone, attacks there make life unpredictable as well. More than 50% of the population is younger than 20 years old and the high population growth only exacerbates the problems. Unemployment, poverty and inflation rates remain very high. Due to the lack of perspectives, many young people get involved in drug-trafficking or join militant groups.

Foreign aid will not sustain improvement as long as the problem of rampant corruption is not solved. The strong push by neighboring Pakistan to send back very large numbers of Afghan refugees, adds additional strain on social, health and economic structures.

Much of the population long for peace and are fed-up with the violence coming from insurgent groups like the Taliban or Islamic State and do not trust them, even if negotiations do start in earnest. The ongoing talks with the Taliban send a very mixed message to ordinary Afghans: On the one hand, these talks may be their best and even only chance of bringing peace. On the other hand, it must appear very strange that the very government they have elected is not officially part of the negotiations. Such demands made by the Taliban do not bode well for Afghanistan's future, let alone for providing space for its minorities to exist.

## External Links - WWL 2020: Keys to understanding

- Link for general background information: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-south-asia-12011352>. - <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-south-asia-12011352>
- Political and legal landscape: negotiating peace - <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/nothing-is-agreed-until-everything-is-agreed-first-steps-in-afghan-peace-negotiations/>
- Political and legal landscape: human and women's rights - <https://www.rferl.org/a/taliban-afghanistan-open-women-s-rights-only-terms/29755102.html?ltflags=mailer>
- Political and legal landscape: refused to work - <https://www.rferl.org/a/us-ends-contacts-afghan-security-adviser-mohib/29829238.html?ltflags=mailer>
- Political and legal landscape: peace dialogue - [https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/afghanistan-diplomacy-gathers-steam-even-attacks-increase?utm\\_source=Sign+Up+to+Crisis+Group%27s+Email+Updates&utm\\_campaign=03f0d00a5d-EMAIL\\_CAMPAIGN\\_2019\\_07\\_05\\_10\\_11\\_COPY\\_01&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=0\\_1dab8c11ea-03f0d00a5d-359283577](https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/afghanistan-diplomacy-gathers-steam-even-attacks-increase?utm_source=Sign+Up+to+Crisis+Group%27s+Email+Updates&utm_campaign=03f0d00a5d-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2019_07_05_10_11_COPY_01&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_1dab8c11ea-03f0d00a5d-359283577)
- Political and legal landscape: announced - <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2019/09/07/trump-cancels-peace-talks-afghan-taliban-leaders-bomb-attack/>
- Political and legal landscape: will take time - <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/b159-getting-afghanistan-peace-process-back-track>
- Political and legal landscape: results of the October 2018 parliamentary elections - <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/the-results-of-afghanistans-2018-parliamentary-elections-a-new-but-incomplete-wolesi-jirga/>

- Political and legal landscape: improvements - [https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/afghanistans-low-turnout-election-insecurity-and-unsettled-prospects-peace?utm\\_source=Sign+Up+to+Crisis+Group%27s+Email+Updates&utm\\_campaign=21f35586dc-EMAIL\\_CAMPAIGN\\_2019\\_10\\_01\\_01\\_22&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=0\\_1dab8c11ea-21f35586dc-359283577](https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/afghanistans-low-turnout-election-insecurity-and-unsettled-prospects-peace?utm_source=Sign+Up+to+Crisis+Group%27s+Email+Updates&utm_campaign=21f35586dc-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2019_10_01_01_22&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_1dab8c11ea-21f35586dc-359283577)
- Political and legal landscape: very passionate - <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/08/world/asia/afghanistan-taliban-peace-talks.html>
- Political and legal landscape: replacing - <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-governor/second-afghan-governor-defies-president-ghani-idUSKCN1G20GK?feedType=RSS&feedName=worldNews>
- Religious landscape: bomb attack - <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/02/world/asia/afghanistan-sikhs-bombing.html>
- Religious landscape: since 2018 - <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/afghanistan-why-are-the-taliban-attacking-hazaras/29604830.html>
- Economic landscape: dropping - <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/a-drop-from-peak-opium-cultivation-the-2018-afghanistan-survey/>
- Economic landscape: UNDP - <http://hdr.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/AFG>
- Economic landscape: crossroads between Central and South Asia - <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publication/reconnecting-afghanistan-lessons-cross-border-engagement>
- Social and cultural landscape: UNICEF country report - <https://www.unicef.org/afghanistan/sites/unicef.org.afghanistan/files/2018-05/afg-report-oocs2018.pdf>
- Social and cultural landscape: SIGAR - <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/audits/SIGAR-19-49-AR.pdf>
- Social and cultural landscape: refugees returning from neighboring countries - <https://asiafoundation.org/2019/07/31/opinion-survey-of-the-afghan-returnees/>
- Technological landscape: access to telecom services - <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/one-land-two-rules-7-delivering-public-services-in-insurgency-affected-andar-district-in-ghazni-province/>
- Technological landscape: urbanization rate - <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/afghanistan/publication/leveraging-urbanization-afghanistan>
- Security situation: withdrew completely from two northern provinces - <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/working-in-a-grey-zone-icrc-forced-to-scale-back-its-work-in-afghanistan/>
- Security situation: taking control of another provincial capital - <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/The-Taliban-offensive-continues:-hundreds-of-deaths,-including-civilians-44658.html>
- Security situation: here to stay - [https://jamestown.org/program/briefs-309/?mc\\_cid=aea8dfd644&mc\\_eid=b8f233d4ea](https://jamestown.org/program/briefs-309/?mc_cid=aea8dfd644&mc_eid=b8f233d4ea)
- Security situation: growing in numbers and power - [https://apnews.com/0a4f38c0ead84ecba2e0102c8b3b0b40?utm\\_source=Pew+Research+](https://apnews.com/0a4f38c0ead84ecba2e0102c8b3b0b40?utm_source=Pew+Research+)



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- Security situation: civilian - [https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/afghanistan\\_protection\\_of\\_civilians\\_annual\\_report\\_2018\\_final\\_24\\_feb\\_2019\\_v3.pdf](https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/afghanistan_protection_of_civilians_annual_report_2018_final_24_feb_2019_v3.pdf)
- Security situation: casualties - [https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/afghanistan\\_protection\\_of\\_civilians\\_annual\\_report\\_2018\\_final\\_24\\_feb\\_2019\\_v3.pdf](https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/afghanistan_protection_of_civilians_annual_report_2018_final_24_feb_2019_v3.pdf)
- Security situation: majority of civilian casualties - <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/civilians-at-greater-risk-from-pro-government-forces-while-peace-seems-more-elusive/>
- Security situation: high - <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-49662640>
- Security situation: "Global Terrorism Index" - <http://visionofhumanity.org/indexes/terrorism-index/>
- Security situation: not to begin proceedings - <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/icc-rejects-war-crimes-investigation-in-afghanistan-continuing-impunity-for-perpetrators-no-voice-yet-for-victims/>

## WWL 2020: Church information / Afghanistan

### Christian origins

Christianity may have reached Afghanistan by the 2nd century AD. According to traditions passed on by Eusebius of Caesarea (260-339 AD), the apostles Thomas and Bartholomew brought the Christian message to Parthia and Bactria, which includes today's north-western Afghanistan. The congregations which grew up developed into the Nestorian Church and Afghan cities like Herat, Kandahar and Balkh became bishopric seats. In the 13th century a Christian ruler converted to Islam and became Sultan, leading to a decline in the number of followers of Christianity, which was nearly completely extinguished by the reign of Timur in 1405.

In the 17th century, Armenian merchants came to Kabul and in time a small Christian community developed, but this Armenian community was forced to leave the country by 1871. Attempts at building a Protestant church in Kabul came to an end in 1973. Today, Christianity has been pushed underground completely. It is claimed that in the basement of the Italian embassy, there is still a legally recognized church, the only one in the country. But it is not publicly accessible and therefore only serves expatriate Christians.

### Church spectrum today

For security reasons no WCD breakdown is shown here.

# WWL 2020: Persecution Dynamics / Afghanistan

## Reporting period

1 November 2018 – 31 October 2019

## Position on the World Watch List

With a score of 93 points, Afghanistan once again ranked 2 in WWL 2020, but went down 1 point compared to WWL 2019, due to a decrease in the score for violence.

In the WWL 2020 reporting period Christians in Afghanistan endured the same extreme levels of pressure as in North Korea. In terms of scoring, Afghanistan and North Korea only differ through a slightly lower score for violence in Afghanistan, resulting in a score which is only one point less than North Korea. Nevertheless, the very high score for violence reflects a further increase in insurgency – not only has the Islamic State group established itself alongside the Taliban as a violent Islamic player in Afghanistan, the latter also controls an increasing amount of the country's territory. A second reason for the very high score is that, for more than half of the WWL 2020 reporting period, preparations for the presidential elections in September 2019 provided grounds for numerous attacks. At the same time, the slight decrease in the violence score compared to WWL 2019 reflects that it has become more difficult to get detailed reports from insurgency-ruled areas and does not necessarily mean less violence against Christians has taken place.

## Persecution engines

Persecution engines: Afghanistan	Abbreviation	Level of influence
Islamic oppression	IO	Very strong
Religious nationalism	RN	Not at all
Clan and ethnic antagonism	CEA	Very strong
Christian denominational protectionism	CDP	Not at all
Communist and post - Communist oppression	CPCO	Not at all
Secular intolerance	SI	Not at all
Dictatorial paranoia	DPA	Weak
Organized corruption and crime	OCC	Strong

*The scale for the level of influence of Persecution engines in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong. For more information see WWL Methodology.*

### **Islamic oppression (Very strong):**

The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan neither allows any Afghan citizens to become Christians nor recognizes converts as such. Conversion is seen as apostasy and brings shame on the family and the Islamic community. Therefore, converts hide their new-won faith as far as possible. The Taliban and IS increased their control over parts of the country; according to a report in June 2018 by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, insurgents control or are fighting for control [across 12 provinces](#) and, out of 407 districts, 178 are either fully under Taliban control (59) or are contested (119). Thus their influence is growing as shown by the high number of attacks and battles with government forces struggling for supremacy in various provinces.

The new leadership of the Taliban, which is even more inclined to radical Islamic views, has stepped up its campaign to control areas. Also, the extreme violence used by groups related to IS (e.g. Islamic State in the Khorasan Province/ISKP) has translated into an even higher number of people being killed in attacks or displaced as discussed above under the heading 'Security Situation'.

Christians of Afghan nationality are all converts with a Muslim background. If they are discovered, they face discrimination and hostility (including death) at the hands of family, friends and community. Muslim religious leaders will most likely be the instigators and the local authorities can be involved, too. According to a survey published in November 2017, Afghan people display the [highest levels of confidence](#) in their religious leaders and in the media - far ahead of their trust in any politicians. More than 60% of respondents said they would welcome religious leaders being more involved in politics. In the southwestern and eastern parts of the country, this percentage was as high as 75%.

### **Clan and ethnic antagonism (Very strong):**

The concept of nation is alien to the Afghan way of thinking. One's own family comes first, followed by the clan and then the tribe – and all of these are much more important than the country as a whole. People are deeply entrenched in caring for their families, villages and tribes. If someone dares to turn from his tribe to embrace something new and maybe even foreign, this results in high pressure being exerted to make that person return to traditional norms. If this does not happen, such a person will be looked upon as a traitor of the community and hence excluded. This applies to all "deviations" but even more if someone turns to Christianity. The Christian religion is considered to be Western and hostile to Afghan culture, society and Islam and leaving Islam is seen as treason. As already mentioned above, the US State Department's 2018 IRF report states that "Muslim residents remained suspicious of development assistance projects, which they often viewed as surreptitious efforts to advance Christianity or engage in proselytization."

### Organized corruption and crime (Strong):

The lack of exportable goods has led to a huge trade imbalance, causing the country to be in constant financial debt. A stunning 80% of the GDP comes from the informal sector and so corruption and crime are omnipresent. This also affects Christians because they belong to the low-income majority of society. One of the main economic problems Afghanistan faces is that growing illicit drugs such as opium is much more lucrative than virtually any other crop; details are to be found in the [UN report](#) published in November 2018.

The Taliban are heavily involved in drug production; estimations are that 70-80% of all drug trafficking profit is channeled into funding Taliban activities. The income from poppy cultivation not only funds armed militant groups, it also fuels corruption. The [UNODC](#) 2018 opium survey, published in July 2019, shows that i) opium is becoming increasingly available on the open market, alongside licit crops; ii) opium sells at much higher prices than any other crop, and alternatives are hard to find. Anyone who gets in the way of the drug lords will simply be pushed aside, a practice which has intensified.

### Drivers of persecution

Drivers of Persecution: Afghanistan	IO	RN	CEA	CDP	CPCO	SI	DPA	OCC
	VERY STRONG	-	VERY STRONG	-	-	-	WEAK	STRONG
Government officials	Very strong	-	Very strong	-	-	-	Weak	Weak
Ethnic group leaders	Very strong	-	Very strong	-	-	-	Weak	Weak
Non-Christian religious leaders	Very strong	-	Very strong	-	-	-	Weak	Weak
Religious leaders of other churches	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Violent religious groups	Very strong	-	Very strong	-	-	-	Weak	Weak
Ideological pressure groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs	Very strong	-	Strong	-	-	-	-	-
One's own (extended) family	Very strong	-	Very strong	-	-	-	-	-
Political parties	Strong	-	Strong	-	-	-	Weak	Weak

Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Organized crime cartels or networks	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	Strong
Multilateral organizations (e.g. UN, OIC etc.) and embassies	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

The scale for the level of influence of Drivers of persecution in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong. Please note that "-" denotes "not at all". For more information see WWL Methodology.

#### Drivers of Islamic oppression:

- Government officials and Political parties (Very strong/Strong):**  
As Afghanistan is per Constitution an Islamic state, all other religions are seen as alien to the country and consequently government parties and officials are hostile towards all signs of Christianity.
- Ethnic group leaders, Islamic leaders and violent religious groups (Very strong):**  
As explained above, ethnic and religious leaders are stronger and more powerful than government officials. The continuing Taliban insurgency, now joined by Taliban's rivals, the Islamic State group, puts an additional pressure on the already hidden group of Christians. If discovered, they face almost certain death or immediate expulsion.
- Families (Very strong):**  
For most families a conversion brings shame, and the family will do much - in some cases everything necessary - to bring the convert back to Islam and to atone for the shame.
- Normal citizens (Very strong):**  
What has been said for families can be said about the wider community (neighbors and friends) as well. Leaving Islam is seen as a rejection of Afghan culture and society and needs to be stopped.

#### Drivers of Clan and ethnic antagonism:

- Government officials and Political parties (Very strong/Strong):**  
As Afghanistan is organized first and foremost along ethnic lines, affiliation to an ethnicity and tribe is the highest priority and needs to be protected and defended above all else.
- Ethnic group leaders, Islamic leaders and violent religious groups (Very strong):**  
Ethnicity, often backed by religious affiliation, defines a person's being and consequently, ethnic leaders wield a strong influence over people. The very same dynamics described for *Islamic oppression* are active in this respect as well.
- Normal citizens and (extended) Family (Strong):**  
Everyone leaving his or her given community, for example by changing his or her religion to Christianity, is seen as committing treason and in need of being brought back.

The very same drivers already mentioned under *Islamic oppression* are active here as well, since in Afghan culture, ethnic and religious identity are regarded as being one and the same.

#### **Drivers of Organized corruption and crime:**

- ***Government officials (Very strong):***

The government is weak and its officials, especially on the local level, will do everything to capitalize on the (limited) power and authority they hold. When Christians are exposed or simply oppose some illicit practice, they are in a weak position and no-one will protect them. They can even become a high value hostage to barter over and to strike deals for. Many government officials benefit from receiving bribes for looking the other way.

- ***Violent religious groups (Strong):***

It is a well-known fact that opium cultivation and trade is particularly intense in the southern province of Kandahar, a Taliban stronghold. The revenue from the drug trade is an important source for financing the insurgency and anyone seen as endangering this business (or is simply in its way) is driven away by all means necessary.

- ***Organized crime cartels or networks (Strong):***

The drug lords - of any affiliation - will protect their business and transportation routes at all costs. Christians, who are deeply hidden in society anyway, will have no protection against them at all if discovered.

## **Geographical hotspots of persecution**

According to the estimation of UNAMA and SIGAR mentioned above, around half of Afghan territory is either in the hands of insurgent groups or is contested by them. Given the current trend of withdrawing foreign troops from Afghanistan and of training local security personnel, there is scant hope that this ratio will improve in the short term. One hotspot deserving particular mention is the province of Ghazni, where the fighting was so intense that the parliamentary elections of 2018 could not be held. (However, voting there did go ahead for the presidential elections in 2019.)

## **Christian communities and how they are affected**

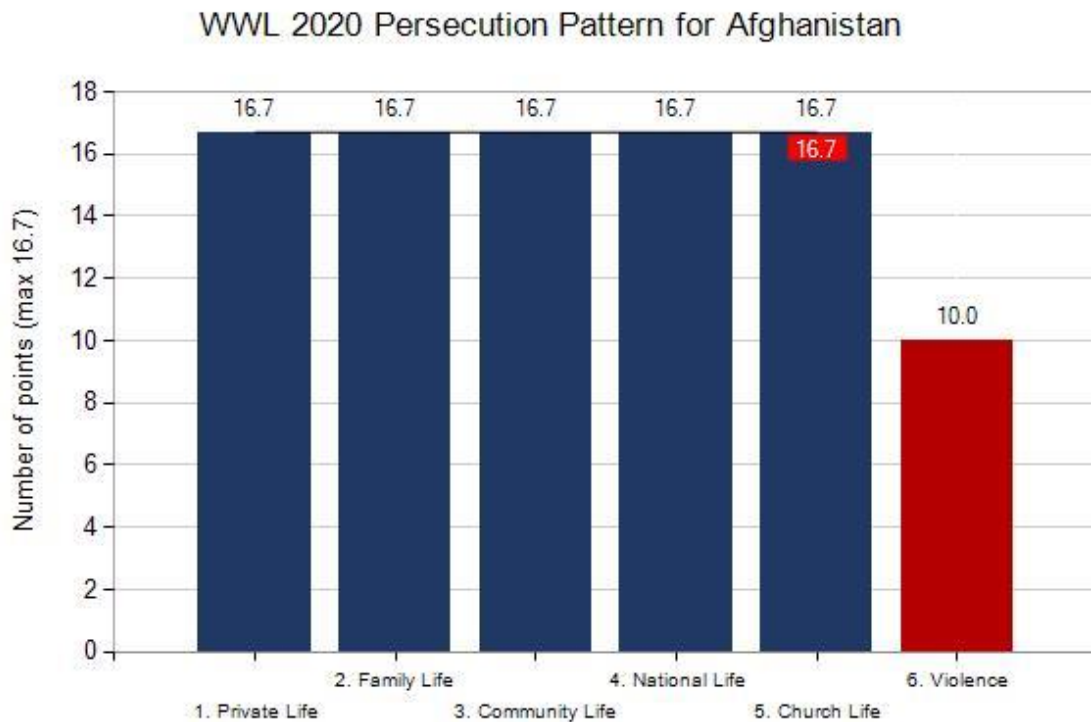
**Communities of expatriate Christians:** These are not included as a separate WWL category as they are so few, so protected and so isolated that they are hardly impacted by the country's situation.

**Historical Christian communities:** These do not exist in Afghanistan.

**Converts to Christianity:** Christians from a Muslim background try their utmost not to be discovered by family, friends, neighbors or the wider community. Depending on the family, they may even have to fear for their lives. For them, living openly as a Christian is simply not possible - even the suspicion of being a Christian can bring severe persecution.

**Non-traditional Christian communities:** These do not exist in Afghanistan.

## The Persecution pattern



The WWL 2020 Persecution pattern for Afghanistan shows:

- The pressure on Christians in Afghanistan remained at the maximum level of 16.7 for all spheres of life, reflecting the fact that it is impossible to live as a Christian publicly there. The country is increasingly challenged by Islamic militants, with the Taliban controlling or contesting more and more areas and with the Islamic State group targeting minorities.
- While maximum scores for pressure in the Family, Private and Community spheres is typical for strictly Islamic countries, the pressure in the National and Church spheres points to a government relying on strictly interpreted Islamic rules and a basically tribal society (despite all promises to international bodies about making attempts to live up to human rights standards).
- The violence score of 10 points shows a decrease from the WWL 2019 level of 10.6 points. This decrease was due to the fact that the reporting of incidents became more difficult on account of the volatile security situation. Violence against Christians remains on a very high level, but the measures taken against converts depends on the family involved.

### Pressure in the 5 spheres of life

In each of the five spheres of life discussed below, details are shown from four of the highest scoring block questions, with those items scoring highest listed first. In some cases, an additional paragraph per sphere is included to give further information deemed important. (To see how individual questions are scored on a scale 0 – 4 points, please see the “WWL Scoring example” in the WWL Methodology, available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>, password: freedom).



### Private sphere:

- **Conversion has been opposed, forbidden, or punishable (Block 1.1 / Score: 4 points):** Afghanistan is an Islamic nation and any deviation from Islam is forbidden by law and tradition, and conversion is punishable. The government's position (as well as that of the average Afghan in the street) is that Afghans cannot be Christian and that it is illegal to have any other faith than Islam. However, as the government has learned that openly punishing converts leads to unwanted international attention and diplomatic problems, converts are dealt with "swiftly and silently", as stated by one country expert.
- **It has been dangerous to privately own or keep Christian materials (Block 1.3 / Score: 4 points):** Any Christian material will attract attention and is therefore carefully avoided. Christians will try to keep as little Christian material in their homes or in their private belongings as possible since there is always the danger of searches, especially in regions ruled by the Taliban. Even the use of material on communication devices or via the Internet (which is not available in all regions) is done with the utmost caution.
- **It has been risky for Christians to display Christian images or symbols (Block 1.5 / Score: 4 points):** No one will reveal symbols or any other signs of Christianity in Afghanistan, as this will lead to a public outcry and harsh consequences. Even members of the expatriate community in Kabul - who are not included in WWL analysis for Afghanistan - avoid showing any hint of their Christian faith, thus illustrating the levels of pressure experienced.
- **It has been risky for Christians to speak about their faith with immediate family members (Block 1.7 / Score: 4 points):** Converts always have to be very cautious as even the suspicion of having converted can lead to severe consequences like arrest and the destruction of homes. Families often hide their faith from their own children. As they can never know which members of their clan have been recruited by IS or Taliban, they are intensely cautious about whom they trust in regard to their faith. Social control is high and it is difficult to hide newly won Christian faith over a long period of time, especially if the convert has children. Additionally, converts are in a catch-22 situation as they do not want to send their children to a madrasa but cannot share about the new faith to their children either, because that would be too dangerous.

*Given the high pressure under which converts in Afghanistan find themselves, it is clear that they also have great difficulties in meeting each other and need to exercise the utmost care, when they are listening in to Christian radio or programs in the internet, especially, as normal in Afghan culture, there is very little privacy. Praying and Bible reading for oneself is only possible when converts are sure they are alone. Even in cities where more openness has developed over recent years, converts can hardly enjoy any freedom.*

### Family sphere:

- **Babies and children of Christians have automatically been registered under the state or majority religion (Block 2.1 / Score: 4 points):** In Afghanistan, Islam is the only religion under which citizens can be officially registered; as a result, every Afghan is registered as Muslim. Anything else is unacceptable and unthinkable.

- **Parents have been hindered in raising their children according to their Christian beliefs (Block 2.7 / Score: 4 points):** Parents who teach their children Christian faith risk exposure. When it is noticed, that such children have a different opinion from the majority or simply speak out carelessly and openly, the Christian family will need to leave the region for its own safety. Therefore it is a question of whether parents are willing to take such a risk.
- **Spouses of converts have been put under pressure (successfully or unsuccessfully) by others to divorce (Block 2.11 / Score: 4 points):** There is pressure on spouses to divorce or nullify a marriage in the case of a Christian spouse. The strongest pressure is put on any woman whose husbands have accepted the Christian faith. Her parents will try to achieve a divorce and cause great trouble in the family. Converts are sometimes sent to a mental hospital, since families believe that no sane person would ever leave Islam.
- **Christian spouses of non-Christians have been excluded from the right or opportunity to claim custody of the children in divorce cases (Block 2.12 / Score: 4 points):** Christian spouses not only face the loss of custody of their children, since Afghan culture requires them to be brought up as Muslims, they will also lose inheritance rights.

*Converts face many more limitations than those listed above. Baptisms are considered a crime punishable by death and therefore have to be carried out in secret. As most Christians will keep their conversion secret, they will be buried according to Islamic rites. If Afghans are discovered to have become Christians, their children will automatically be taken away and given to adoption by Muslim families. Those children will be harassed in their new family and at school. If a family succeeds in keeping their conversion secret, the children will have no option but to continue attending madrassa classes and are likely to grow up confused if they know about the Christian faith of their parents.*

#### **Community sphere:**

- **Christians have been harassed, threatened or obstructed in their daily lives for faith-related reasons (Block 3.1 / Score: 4 points):** If a Christian woman chooses not to wear a head-covering she will draw unwanted attention and locals will try to manipulate her into wearing one. Such pressure by society is not limited to questions of dress code.
- **Christians have been put under pressure to take part in non-Christian religious ceremonies or community events (Block 3.5 / Score: 4 points):** Whether an Afghan is known as a Christian (e.g. in a more tolerant family) or unknown, participation in such Islamic activities as Namaz (prayer), mosque visits, fasting, Eid celebrations etc. is expected. Converts are also pressured into attending mosque prayers, especially on Fridays. Whereas people in Kabul may get away with a more lenient life-style to a limited extent, this is impossible in areas outside the main cities.
- **Christians have faced disadvantages in their education at any level for faith-related reasons (Block 3.9 / Score: 4 points):** Christian parents fear sending their children to school because they want to protect them from false indoctrination and from revealing their hidden Christian identity. If they are discovered and are not immediately exposed, they will be pressured into leaving school without being given the necessary documents to continue school elsewhere.

- **Christians have been interrogated or compelled to report to the local police for faith-related reasons (Block 3.13 / Score: 4 points):** If Christian converts are discovered, they will certainly be taken away for investigation and interrogation. These interrogations are intense, regardless of whether they are carried out by government authorities, the Taliban or IS. The police are also interested in extracting money or confessions. For reaching this goal, suspected converts are put in prison.

*Any convert discovered will lose access to community resources and healthcare. Communities exercise immense pressure to ensure allegiance and order and consequently monitor everyone. Whoever is seen as deviating is put under pressure to return to the mainstream religious and political views, be it by physical torture or by using [occult practices](#) which are widespread in Afghanistan.*

#### **National sphere:**

- **The Constitution (or comparable national or state law) limits freedom of religion as formulated in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Block 4.1 / Score: 4 points):** Article 3 of the Constitution, which states that no law shall contravene the tenets and provisions of Islam, leads to restrictions in many areas. Although the wording is flexible and it is not stated what may be deemed as inappropriate and against Islam, in practice accusations of conversion are equated with blasphemy and neither Christians nor other religious minorities (including non-Sunni Muslims) enjoy freedom of religion.
- **Christians have been hindered in travelling for faith-related reasons (Block 4.4 / Score: 4 points):** All travel by anyone suspected of being a Christian (or of having interest in the 'Christian West') is monitored and often hindered if it is suspected that the travel is being conducted for faith-based reasons (e.g. to attend a conference).
- **Media reporting has been incorrect or biased against Christians (Block 4.10 / Score: 4 points):** Christians are seldom the topic of media reporting, but if they are, the reporting is always distorted and stirs up anti-Christian sentiment. The current conflict - and particularly operations carried out by the US-led military alliance - are often portrayed as having a Christian motivation or of being linked with Christian faith in some way.
- **Christians have been accused of blasphemy or insulting the majority religion, either by state authorities or by pressure groups (Block 4.13 / Score: 4 points):** The punishment for blasphemy is not so much a rights issue as it is a societal one, followed up intensely by the local religious authorities or jihadist groups. In many cases, blasphemy charges are reportedly brought before the authorities (or taken into people's own hands) for reasons of personal enmity or envy.

*Christians are discriminated against when they have to deal with the authorities, they have difficulties in running their own businesses and of course face unjust treatment when they have to stand trial. If they have experienced such problems, it is usually (and officially) not because of their faith, but due to other alleged crimes (e.g. due to treason by working with foreign intelligence agencies, murder or drug dealing).*

## Church sphere:

- **Activities of churches have been monitored, hindered, disturbed, or obstructed (Block 5.1 / Score: 4 points):** There is no publicly accessible church in Afghanistan. (The only functioning chapel is placed in the basement of the Italian embassy in Kabul and only open for the small number of expatriates still working in the city - mainly diplomatic and military staff.) Any form of organized and/or meeting noted by the Taliban or monitoring agencies receives high attention. Christian groups (no matter how small they are) have to be cautious about how they meet. (Even expatriates - although not scored in WWL analysis for the reasons already stated above - take precautions and split into very small groups when meeting.) Often they are watched and followed undetected until they meet with a bigger group or engage in some activity like Bible distribution.
- **Churches have been hindered from organizing Christian activities inside their place of worship (Block 5.4 / Score: 4 points):** Convert fellowships can only gather with the utmost caution and only when it is clear that the members know and trust each other. Precautionary measures such as changing locations etc. make it very difficult to meet as church.
- **Pastors or other Christian leaders, or their family members, have been special targets of harassment for faith-related reasons (Block 5.11 / Score: 4 points):** Leaders of Christian groups are not known in public. As one country expert stated, if the radical groups or Muslim society in general knew who was a Christian leader, they would kill him, in order to intimidate Christians in his network and seek to destroy the group.
- **Openly selling or distributing Bibles and other Christian materials has been hindered (Block 5.14 / Score: 4 points):** There is no possibility for distributing or selling Bibles and other Christian materials; even sharing electronically can have life-threatening consequences if traced.

*Open work among youth is not possible and Christians cannot set up charitable organizations, openly integrate converts into their meetings, train their own leaders or ask for the registration or building of a church. The Afghan Church is deeply underground and as far as the official view is concerned, non-existent.*

## Violence

Violence is at a very high level and there were reports of Afghan Christians being killed for their faith and of Afghans being killed just on suspicion of being Christian. No details can be published for security reasons.

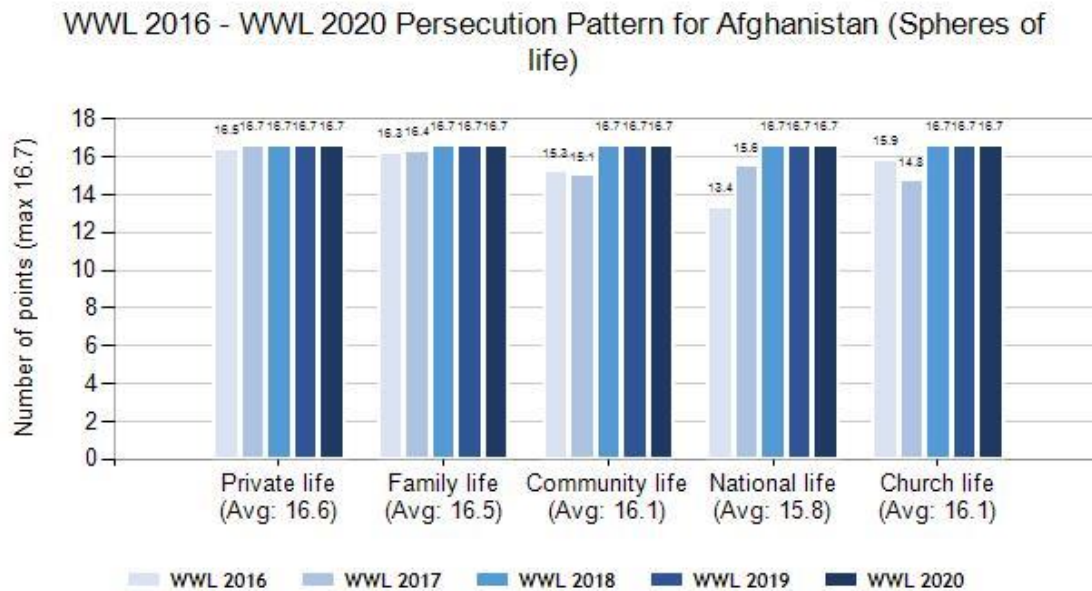
## 5 Year trends

At the beginning of the five year period, there were still significant numbers of expatriate Christians in the country, which kept the scores for all the spheres of life slightly lower, even though it was already getting difficult for expatriates to live openly as a Christian. Most of them have left now (except for diplomatic and military staff) and therefore this category has no longer been included in the scoring since WWL 2018. This has caused the scoring of the average pressure to rise (as can be seen in Chart 1) - with increases in the scores especially for the *Community, National and Church spheres of life* (Chart 2).

**Chart 1:**

WWL 2016 - WWL 2020 Persecution Pattern history: Afghanistan	Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life
2020	16.7
2019	16.7
2018	16.7
2017	15.7
2016	15.5

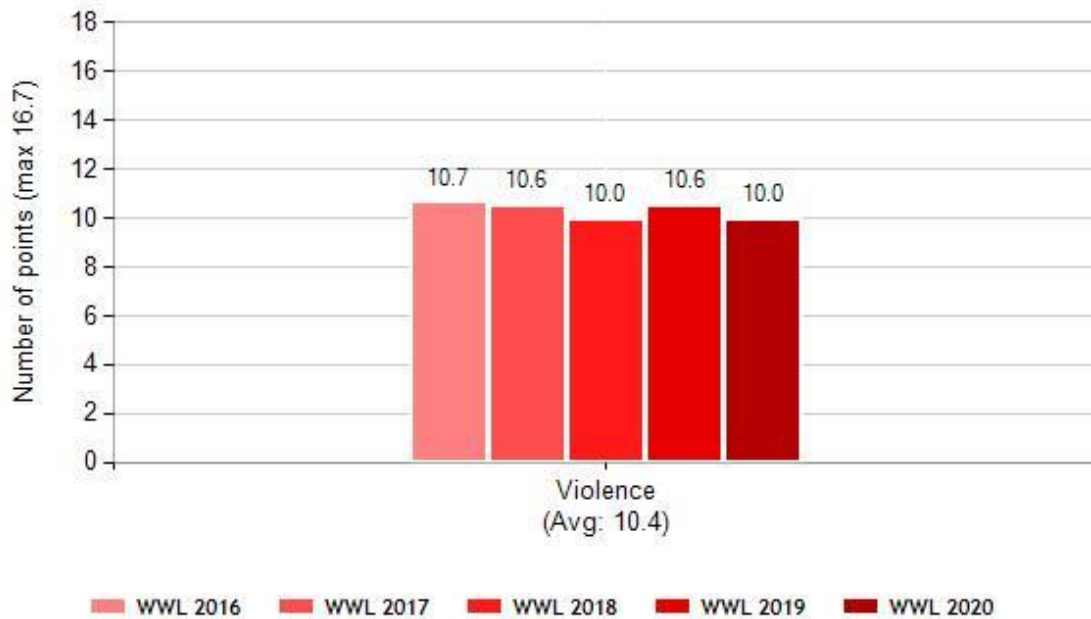
**Chart 2:**



**Chart 3:**

Being Christian in Afghanistan is now understood to mean being a convert, and a well-hidden one at that. For the last five reporting periods the level of violence against Christians has more or less stabilized between 10.0 points and 10.7 - a very high level. It is very difficult to get verifiable information out of the country, particularly from the increasing number of areas where the Taliban and other Islamic militant groups are fighting for control.

### WWL 2016 - WWL 2020 Persecution Pattern for Afghanistan (Violence)



## Gender profile of persecution

### Female Pressure Points:

- **Abduction**
- **Discrimination/Harassment via education**
- **Forced divorce**
- **Forced marriage**
- **Incarceration by family/house arrest**
- **Trafficking**
- **Violence – death**
- **Violence – psychological**
- **Violence – sexual**
- **Violence – verbal**

Although conversions usually happen together as a family unit in Afghanistan, when a woman decides to convert to Christianity, she is likely to keep it a secret. The religious persecution of Christian women in Afghanistan is facilitated by the very weak role women play in Afghan society and their few rights to social protection. Only 4% of women have completed [secondary school](#) or gone beyond secondary school, where they are required to learn Islamic doctrine.

In this context, women who convert to the Christian faith are prone to even more pressure and harassment than men. Women in Afghanistan in general are highly vulnerable to all forms of physical abuse and have very little financial social or financial autonomy. A BBC News article published on 1 July 2018 states: "Based on the estimates of the United Nations Population Fund, 87% of women have been [victims](#) of at least one form of physical, sexual or psychological violence, and 62% have experienced multiple forms of abuse" (paragraph 14).

Incarceration by family/house arrest is an invisible and acceptable means of putting a Christian woman under pressure, as is the threat to divorce her. Women can be sold into slavery or prostitution, be deprived of food and water and healthcare, locked into rooms, beaten severely, burned or sexually mishandled. It is widely accepted that a husband may beat his wife and [domestic violence](#) appears to be largely normalized. According to a [UN report](#) published in May 2018, the murder of women represents the second most prevalent form of violence against women in Afghanistan. There were 280 cases of murder and “honor killings” of women recorded from January 2016 to December 2017.

In one study conducted by Human Rights Watch, it is estimated that 70% - 80% of women face forced marriages, and 57% of girls are married before the legal marriage age of 16. A young female Christian convert can be forced to marry a non-Christian (often older) with relative ease.

On the other hand, as conversions are kept as secret as possible and women are kept from social interaction as much as possible, women who do not fall prey to the abuse described above are more likely to be able to live their new-found faith out of view and even pass their faith on to husband and family members.

#### **Male Pressure Points:**

- ***Denied access to social community/networks***
- ***Forced to flee town/country***
- ***Incarceration by government***
- ***Violence – death***
- ***Violence – sexual***
- ***Violence – verbal***

Hardly anything is hidden in communal life; many men and boys face persecution from their own families if their Christian faith is discovered. Christian men face ridicule, imprisonment, torture leading to disabilities, sexual abuse by peers and potentially death because of their faith. Men and boys also become targets for militias seeking to coerce them into joining sides to fight.

If one family member gets persecuted, it affects the others as well. They may also experience opposition, as they are suspect by association with the convert.

Male converts must often find alternative sources of income in order to avoid being exposed by not taking part in religious practices in the marketplace. Since men are the bread winners, families rely on them to exist financially. If male converts are killed, female family members are forced to find work which can lead to abuse.

## **Persecution of other religious minorities**

As mentioned above, Shiites are targeted by Sunni radical groups, especially ISKP, in an effort to increase and deepen already existing sectarian rifts, but the Muslim Sufi minority is victim to persecution as well. The July 2018 [attack](#) against the Sikh and Hindu communities in Jalalabad, killing 19, including the only Sikh candidate for parliament, illustrates that religious minorities are being specifically targeted by Islamic State militants.

## Future outlook for the church

The outlook for Christians as viewed through the lens of:

- **Islamic oppression:** The small Christian community shares in all the difficulties the general population faces but has the added vulnerability of being part of the "enemy's religion". *Islamic oppression* will doubtless remain the main engine of persecution of Christians in Afghanistan, driven by home-grown and foreign militants together with family, society and various levels of government.
- **Clan and ethnic antagonism:** Afghanistan will continue to be a tribally driven society. Anyone not subscribing to their tribe's traditions - i.e. by following new ideas (including religion) - excludes themselves from the tribe's identity.
- **Organized corruption and crime:** As long as opium cultivation and trade makes up a significant part of the insurgent groups' budget and also fills the coffers of power-brokers and politicians, organized crime will flourish and anyone perceived as being in the way (including Christians) will face violent opposition.

## External Links - WWL 2020: Persecution Dynamics

- Persecution engines: across 12 provinces - [https://jamestown.org/program/taliban-demonstrates-resilience-with-afghan-spring-offensive/?mc\\_cid=944db91ba6&mc\\_eid=b8f233d4ea](https://jamestown.org/program/taliban-demonstrates-resilience-with-afghan-spring-offensive/?mc_cid=944db91ba6&mc_eid=b8f233d4ea)
- Persecution engines: highest levels of confidence - <https://asiafoundation.org/publication/afghanistan-2017-survey-afghan-people/>
- Persecution engines: UN report - <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/a-drop-from-peak-opium-cultivation-the-2018-afghanistan-survey/>
- Persecution engines: UNODC - [https://www.unodc.org/documents/crop-monitoring/Afghanistan/Afghanistan\\_opium\\_survey\\_2018\\_socioeconomic\\_report.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/crop-monitoring/Afghanistan/Afghanistan_opium_survey_2018_socioeconomic_report.pdf)
- Pressure in the 5 spheres of life : occult practices - [https://www.academia.edu/22693843/Amulets\\_Fortune-telling\\_and\\_Magic.\\_Iran\\_the\\_Caucasus\\_Central\\_Asia\\_and\\_Afghanistan](https://www.academia.edu/22693843/Amulets_Fortune-telling_and_Magic._Iran_the_Caucasus_Central_Asia_and_Afghanistan)
- Gender profile of persecution: secondary school - <https://www.dhsprogram.com/pubs/pdf/FR323/FR323.pdf>
- Gender profile of persecution: victims - <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-44370711>
- Gender profile of persecution: domestic violence - <https://www.dhsprogram.com/pubs/pdf/FR323/FR323.pdf>
- Gender profile of persecution: UN report - [https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/unama\\_ohchr\\_evaw\\_report\\_2018\\_injustice\\_and\\_impunity\\_29\\_may\\_2018.pdf](https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/unama_ohchr_evaw_report_2018_injustice_and_impunity_29_may_2018.pdf)
- Persecution of other religious minorities: attack - <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Jalalabad,-ISIS-attacks-Sikh-and-Hindu-minorities:-19-dead-44314.html>



## Additional reports and articles

### WWR in-depth reports

A selection of in-depth reports is available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/> (password: freedom).

At the time of publication there were no items specifically for Afghanistan.

### World Watch Monitor news articles

Articles are available at: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/countries/afghanistan>.

### Recent country developments

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