

WORLD WATCH LIST 2024

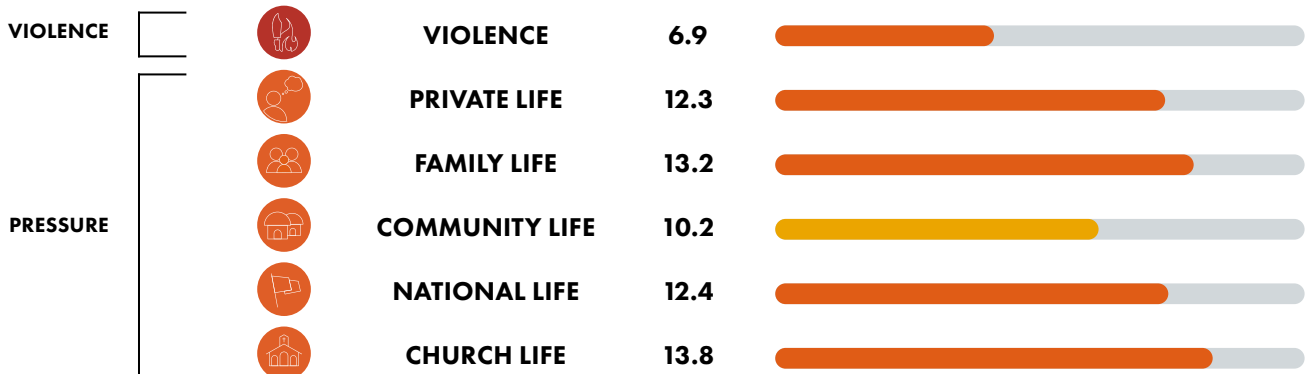
SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

TUNISIA

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.
33



LEVELS OF VIOLENCE AND PRESSURE



Each of the six categories is scored out of a maximum of 16.7 points. The categories added together total 100 points (6 x 16.7 = 100).

Key findings

A journalist [who investigated](#) the situation of Tunisian Christians in depth states: “Tunisian Christians face discrimination and targeting that is often obscure and hidden to the public eye... Because of their Christian identities, many experience job insecurity, abandonment from family, friends and even fiancés; they are victims of verbal, mental and physical abuse.” Due to such factors, most Tunisian converts to Christianity cannot worship openly and choose to hide their faith. The hostility and pressure they face from society makes it dangerous for Christians to share their faith with their family members or friends. They also find it difficult to gather for worship due to the risks and possible exposure. They are monitored by the Tunisian security services. There are also Sub-Saharan African Christians residing in the country. These Christians cannot openly proselytize, but their main problem is racial abuse, which strongly increased following [inflammatory comments](#) made by President Saied in February 2023 (VOA, 2 March 2023). Following his remarks, many lost their jobs, while others fled the country. Those who remain fear daily abuse.

Quick facts

LEADER

President Kais Saied

POPULATION

12,152,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

22,200¹

MAIN RELIGION

Islam

GOVERNMENT

Parliamentary Republic



Context

Religious Context	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	22,200	0.2
Muslims	12,092,000	99.5
Agnostics	28,700	0.2
Atheists	3,700	0.0

Source²

In 2011, the so-called “Tunisian Revolution” started because of high unemployment, poor living conditions, corruption and a general lack of freedom. The then president was overthrown, and the Arab Spring was initiated across the wider region. However, many governments (more than 10 in less than a decade) have since struggled with economic challenges and political instability. In July 2021 President Saied seized power. A constitutional referendum in July 2022 turned Tunisia into a presidential republic, with almost absolute power for the president.

Saied continued his crackdown on all opposition in 2023, with the arrest of several opposition leaders as well as media figures in February 2023 ([ReliefWeb, 24 February 2023](#)). However, the key moment came in April 2023 with the arrest of the main opposition leader Rached Ghannouchi. ([Al Jazeera, 20 April 2023](#)). Despite widespread and global condemnation

of his arrest, he received a one-year prison sentence. ([Le Monde, 15 May 2023](#)). President Saied received his strongest international rebuke yet after making a racist inflammatory speech in February 2023, in which he accused Sub-Saharan Africans of coming to the country to bring “criminality and violence” and a plot “to change the demographic composition of Tunisia”. ([African Business, 6 March 2023](#)). His comments led not only to a wave of violence against the relatively small Sub-Saharan African community in the country, but also to attacks on Tunisians of Sub-Saharan African descent ([Euronews, 14 March 2023](#)).

In a rather surprising move, the new Constitution does not name Islam as the state religion, which is almost unique in the wider Islamic world. However, Article 5 states that Tunisia “belongs to the Islamic Ummah (community)” and that the state is required to “achieve the purposes of Islam in preserving [people’s] souls, money, religion, and liberty”.

According to World Christian Database 2021, 99.5% of Tunisians are Muslims. Christianity is regarded as a foreign religion by the government, and there is no formal recognition of indigenous church communities. The Roman Catholic Church is the largest officially recognized denomination among expatriate Christians in Tunisia. The Russian Orthodox and the Greek Orthodox Church, as well as the French Protestant and the Anglican Church, are also officially recognized by the government. All denominations have functioning churches in the capital Tunis and mainly serve expatriate Christians residing in the country.

¹ Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

² Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

Tunisia's Christians from a Muslim background remain socially marginalized and are kept under surveillance by the security services. In September 2017, Tunisia overturned the law that prohibited Muslim women from marrying non-Muslim men (BBC News, 15 September 2017). For converts from Islam to Christianity this was a particularly significant step. However, social opposition prevents the implementation of the law in practice (The New Arab, 8 August 2018). Converts from Islam to Christianity are also likely to be excluded from family inheritance and lose custody rights.

How the situation varies by region

Converts from Islam to Christianity have most to fear from their own family members and society, especially in the country's more conservative south. Urban areas, especially the capital Tunis, offer possibilities for converts to escape family pressure and live their faith in more anonymity. Violent Islamic militants

are active in the southern border areas and target Christians indiscriminately, if the opportunity arises.

Who is affected?

Communities of expatriate Christians

Expatriate Christians are relatively free, although public evangelism is not tolerated.

Historical Christian communities

This category is included under "Communities of expatriate Christians".

Converts to Christianity

Converts to Christianity with a Muslim background can face violations from their family members. However, they are more or less free to seek information about the Christian faith, particularly content posted online.

Non-traditional Christian communities

This category is included under "Communities of expatriate Christians".

Main sources of persecution and discrimination

Islamic oppression

At the family level, converts from Islam to Christianity can suffer domestic incarceration from their families. At the political level, Islamist political parties are still influential. The president seems committed to keeping Tunisia an Islamic country, with little respect for the (religious) rights of Tunisian Christians.

Dictatorial paranoia

Since his power grab in July 2021, President Saied has shown no interest in sharing power with other state institutions. The new Constitution has weakened the role of the parliament significantly, while almost giving absolute powers to the president. Although the impact is unclear yet, the rights guaranteed under the Freedom of Religion and Belief will now directly be determined by the president. Saied is known to be socially conservative and seems to be becoming increasingly authoritarian, so it is likely he at least wants to monitor and control the Christian community.



How are men and women differently affected?

Women

High levels of sexual harassment and domestic violence, combined with ongoing societal discriminatory norms, demonstrate a gender gap. This is exploited as a means of religious persecution. Converts from Islam face the greatest breadth of persecution (especially in the traditional family context), including beatings, home expulsion, house arrest, death threats and rape. Married converts face divorce and loss of child custody, whereas single converts may be forced into marriage. The main source of persecution is the dominating male in the family, who may restrict access to Christian communities and materials.

Female typical pressure points:

- Abduction
- Denied access to Christian religious materials, teachings and rites
- Denied custody of children
- Denied inheritance or possessions
- Discrimination/harassment via education
- Forced divorce
- Forced marriage
- Forced out of home – expulsion
- Incarceration by family (house arrest)
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological
- Violence – sexual
- Violence – verbal

Men

New converts are by far the most vulnerable Christians in Tunisia. Male converts face intimidation, job loss, denied access to communities, beatings and death threats. They may further be ostracized for bringing shame on their families by leaving Islam. Pressured by their families, Muslim wives will leave a Christian convert, and he may be denied inheritance or even access to his possessions. The severity of backlash will vary according to his social and political standing. When a man is persecuted, his family becomes vulnerable and lacks protection.

Male typical pressure points:

- Discrimination/harassment via education
- Economic harassment via business/job/work access
- Forced out of home – expulsion
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological

WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution rounded score out of 100
2024	36	69
2023	36	67
2022	35	66
2021	26	67
2020	34	64

The rise of 2 points was caused by increases in pressure in all but the Community Sphere of Life and in a rise in the violence score from 6.5 points to 6.9. Among other things, there were more church attacks and arrests than in the previous reporting period.



Examples of violence in the reporting period

- Several house churches of Tunisian Christians were looted and attacked by community members.
- Several Tunisian Christians were publicly arrested and subsequently questioned about their activities by the police; this happened mainly outside of the capital Tunis. Although no Christian has been prosecuted, these public arrests have a chilling effect, stigmatizing Tunisian Christians both in front of their families and communities.
- Several Tunisian Christians, mostly young women, were forcefully relocated, isolated and/or pressured to marry against their will. These cases happened in rural areas, outside of the capital Tunis.
- Numerous other Tunisian Christians have been mentally or physically abused, with several being expelled from their communities and forced to relocate, mostly by family members.

WWL Year	Christians detained	Christians forced to marry	Christians internally displaced	Churches or Christian buildings attacked or closed
2024	7	2	25	6
2023	5	3	21	4

This table includes only a few categories of faith-based violence during the reporting period - for full results see the violence section of the Full Country Dossier. Since many incidents go unreported, the numbers must be understood as minimum figures. In cases where it has been impossible to count exactly, a symbolic round figure (10, 100* or 1000*) is given which in reality could be significantly higher.*

Private life

Converts from Islam to Christianity experience severe pressure from their families, especially in rural areas. Meeting other Christians and owning Christian materials can be dangerous. They risk ostracization, forced isolation and economic boycotts.

Family life

Tunisian society views non-Muslims as foreign and discriminates against these groups as a means of coercing assimilation into wider Sunni Tunisian culture. Non-Muslims are prohibited from adopting children in Tunisia. Spouses who are discovered to be Christian may be divorced and lose custody of their children. Children of converts must attend mandatory Islamic classes and may experience social ostracization, harassment and even violence because of the religion of their parents.

Community life

Converts, especially in rural areas, experience harassment and social isolation by the community. Forced marriage to Muslim men is commonly used as a threat to young female converts. Converts have also been obstructed in their university studies, discriminated against when applying for jobs, or have their businesses boycotted. Tunisian Christians therefore tend to seek employment with foreign

institutions to avoid discrimination. Monitoring is frequent, and police officers regularly question Tunisian Christians about their activities. Even a routine request for a new passport can lead to detailed interrogation.

National life

Sharia law is not the principal source of legislation, as in many other Arab countries, but Islam still dominates national life. Authorities generally view non-Muslims as outsiders, not deserving of equal status. These sentiments are supported by a hostile media apparatus that seeks to scapegoat and spread misinformation about Christians.

Church life

Tunisian converts cannot register their churches, and no new church has been granted official registration since Tunisia's independence in 1956. Registered churches are allowed to operate freely but face practical difficulties, particularly relating to their property upkeep, hiring staff and obtaining permission to publish and distribute Christian texts in Arabic. Although selling Bibles is not prohibited, in practice there are many difficulties to do so publicly. Distributing Christian materials for free is seen as proselytizing and is forbidden.

International obligations & rights violated

Tunisia has committed to respect and protect fundamental rights under the following international treaties:

1. International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)
2. International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)
3. Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT)
4. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)
5. Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)

Tunisia is not fulfilling its international obligations by regularly violating or failing to protect the following rights of Christians:

- Christian converts are ostracized and faced with opposition by their families and threatened with divorce and loss of child custody (ICCPR Art. 18)
- Christian children are harassed because of their parents' faith (ICCPR Art. 18 and CRC Art. 14)
- Christians face restrictions in employment in the public sector and experience discrimination in the private sector (ICCPR Arts. 25 and 26, and ICESCR Art. 6)
- Christians face harassment and violence if they talk about their faith or engage in proselytization (ICCPR Arts. 18 and 19)

Situation of other religious minorities

Bahai are not officially recognized and cannot have their own place of worship. However, they have recently had some constructive dialogues with government officials. Jewish groups worship freely, and the government provides security for synagogues and partially subsidized restoration and maintenance costs. In May 2023, however, a member of the security services opened fire during a Jewish festival at the popular tourist island of Djerba, killing five people - two Jewish pilgrims and three servicemen ([France 24, 12 May 2023](#)). The government downplayed the seriousness and the antisemitic nature of the attack in a bid to minimize any damage to the recovering tourism sector ([Al-Jazeera, 21 May 2023](#))

The Sunni-Shia divide has been relatively peaceful in Tunisia, although Shia Muslims can experience discrimination, and public figures have spoken out against Shia Islam [in the past](#).

“Some atheists from Muslim families reported receiving family and societal pressure to return to Islam or conceal their atheism, including, for instance, by fasting during Ramadan and abstaining from criticizing Islam” ([Humanist International, 28 October 2020](#)).



Open Doors in Tunisia

Open Doors raises prayer support for believers in Tunisia.



About this brief

- This brief is a summary of the Full Country Dossier produced annually by World Watch Research (WWR), the research department of Open Doors International. It may be used and distributed free of charge, but please always acknowledge the source as: © 2024 Open Doors International.
- The WWL 2024 reporting period was 01 October 2022 - 30 September 2023.
- All brief country profiles can be accessed under 'Advocacy resources' on the research pages of the Open Doors International website, along with the more detailed Full Country Dossiers and the latest update of [WWL Methodology](#). These are also available at the [Open Doors Analytical](#) website (password: freedom).

All photos in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.
