

WORLD WATCH LIST 2022

SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.
9

Iran



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).¹ Red = extreme level, orange = very high, yellow = high

Key findings

Converts from Islam to Christianity bear the brunt of religious freedom violations, carried out by the government in particular and to a lesser extent by society and converts' families. The government sees these Iranian Christians as an attempt by Western countries to undermine Islam and the Islamic regime of Iran. Leaders of Christian converts groups, as well as common members and Christians of other denominational backgrounds who support them, have been arrested, prosecuted and received

¹World Watch Research measures pressure across all spheres of life as well as violence (full methodology [here](#) – password: freedom).

long prison sentences for ‘crimes against national security’. The historical communities of Armenian and Assyrian Christians are recognized and protected by the state but are treated as second-class citizens. They suffer from legalized discrimination. The use of Persian is denied for any religious activity or Christian material, while being Muslim is a requirement for most jobs, especially in the government. In addition, Christians are not allowed contact with Muslim-background Christians (who speak Persian), and cannot have them attend church services.

Quick facts

LEADER

Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei

POPULATION

84,308,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

800,000 (OD estimate)

MAIN RELIGION

Islam

GOVERNMENT

Theocratic Republic



Context

Main Religions	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	800,000	0.9
Muslims	82,915,250	98.3
Agnostics	232,510	0.3
Bahais	215,546	0.3

Source²

Iran became an Islamic Republic when the Shah was removed in the 1979 Revolution and Shia Islamic clerics took control, banning Western influence (which they see as Christian) from their country. Today, the most senior and influential cleric is the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. The withdrawal of USA from the Iran Deal (officially called the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA) in 2018 led to the reinstatement of sanctions. The Iranian currency (rial) fell in value and there was a significant deterioration of the Iranian economy. Tensions grew, which resulted in Iran breaching the terms of its agreement and a shadow war which saw Iran’s most influential military commander, Major General Qasem

Soleimani, assassinated by the USA in January 2020, among other incidents. The current USA government is willing to return to the JCPOA, but as of September 2021, Iran’s position is still unclear. This is partly due to domestic politics, in which there is a division between the Islamic left (Reformists) and the Islamic right (Principlists), with the Pragmatists in the middle. However, it is Supreme Leader Khamenei, a Principlist, who pulls all political strings. He appoints the Guardian Council, which has veto power on all parliamentary legislation and also vets all candidates for political positions, including the parliament. For years, thousands of Reformist candidates have been rejected by the Guardian Council, resulting in opposition boycotts of the latest elections. Hence, after repressing all opposition, the Principlists managed to win both the parliamentary elections in February 2020 and the presidential elections in June 2021. Newly elected hardline president, Ebrahim Raisi, was previously the head of the Iranian judiciary and is known for his role in the execution of thousands of Iranian dissidents. With the Principlists now dominating all state institutions, it has become less likely that Iran will return to the JCPOA.

Protests have been brutally repressed and dozens of

² Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2021) (Adapted according to OD-estimate)

human rights defenders and activists given long prison sentences. The government monitors the internet, censors content or slows connection speed to contain discontent and protests. Those found opposing the regime are likely to be arrested and imprisoned. Iran is one of the world's most repressive countries for journalists; reporters are harassed, arbitrarily arrested, tried unfairly and given long jail sentences.

Iran is one of just six UN states not to have ratified the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Women are, in general, more economically vulnerable, due to low education rates, poverty and early marriage. Under Sharia, daughters typically receive half the inheritance received by sons.

The COVID-19 pandemic affected Iran severely and deteriorated the struggling economy even further. The official average unemployment rate was around 11% in 2021, while the unemployment rate among young Iranians reached 27%.

Iran has alliances with groups like Hezbollah and Hamas. The threat of attack by violent Islamic militants in Iran is high, since Iran has fought against the Sunni Islamic State group and oppresses Sunnis on its soil.

Officially, most Iranians follow the official state religion, Shia Islam. A significant minority (10%) follow Sunni Islam. However, recent research found that only around 32% of Iranians still call themselves Shia adherents. Iran's Constitution recognizes four religious groups: Muslims, Zoroastrians, Jews and Christians. Iranians must declare themselves as one of these in order to claim legal rights, including entrance to university. Everyone who is not Shia Muslim experiences discrimination and limitations, and even some Shia Sufi groups are put under pressure by the government. Unrecognized minorities (converts to Christianity, Bahai, Dervish and non-believers) experience serious violations.



How the situation varies by region

Government control is highest in urban areas, while rural areas are less monitored. However, the anonymity of urban areas gives Christians more freedom to organize meetings and activities than in rural areas, in which social control is higher.

Who is affected?

Communities of expatriate Christians

This group consists of Christian expatriates from the Far East (such as The Philippines and South Korea) and the West, of whom many have a Catholic, Lutheran or Presbyterian background. Of the small number of churches, some expatriate churches have been forced to shut down after local converts with an Islamic background started attending. Joint annual prayer meetings between church leaders of different denominations were also cancelled in the past due to pressure from Iran's security apparatus.

It is absolutely forbidden for expatriate Christians to interact with Iranian converts from Islam to Christianity, let alone welcome them in their church communities.

Historical Christian communities

Historical ethnic Christian minorities such as the Armenian and Assyrian Christians are relatively free to practice their belief. They are allowed to preach to fellow countrymen in their own language, but it is forbidden to minister to people with a Muslim background (speaking Persian) or have them attend church services. Although formally recognized and protected by law, historical Christian communities are treated as second-class citizens and face legalized and societal discrimination. Besides this, they will face imprisonment if they do reach out to Muslims.

Converts to Christianity

Converts from Islam to Christianity constitute the largest category in the country. They bear the brunt of persecution carried out by the government and to a lesser extent by their (extended) families and society. Baptism is seen as a public declaration of one's denunciation of Islam and is therefore forbidden. Children born to converts from Islam to Christianity are automatically registered as Muslims, since their parents cannot change their religious affiliation. Previously, leaders, especially, of Christian convert groups were arrested, prosecuted and received long prison terms for crimes against national security. However, since 2014 an increasing number of non-leaders have received similar charges too, as well as

Christians of other denominations who support them. There is also a growing community of Iranian Christian converts worldwide, as over the years many converts have fled the country and other Iranians have become Christians abroad.

Non-traditional Christian communities

Although it is difficult to make a sharp distinction between this category and the communities of converts, there are Christians belonging to Evangelical, Baptist and Pentecostal communities. They often have an Armenian, Assyrian, Jewish or a Zoroastrian background. Others include the children and grandchildren of converts from Islam. They face the same severe persecution from the government and are discriminated against by society, especially if they engage in any evangelistic or house church activities.



Main sources of persecution and discrimination

Islamic oppression:

All laws must be consistent with Sharia law. A Guardian Council, appointed by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei and consisting of Shia scholars and clerics, reviews all legislation as well as candidates for the highest public appointments, e.g. the presidency and parliament. Ethnic Persians are considered Muslim so converts to Christianity are seen as apostates. This makes almost all Christian activity illegal, especially in the Persian language. Local Muslim clerics sometimes incite violence against religious minority groups. Iranian society is less fanatical than its leadership due to the widespread influence of moderate Sufi Islam as well as the pride of the Iranian people in pre-Islamic Persian culture. Nevertheless, religious families, including those of other ethnic minority groups, will often put pressure on family members converting from Islam to Christianity.

Dictatorial paranoia:

The regime aims to protect the values of the 1979 Revolution, from which it derives its legitimacy. Christianity is viewed as a dangerous Western influence and threat to the Islamic identity of Iran. This explains why converts from Islam especially are convicted for crimes against national security. In addition, the violent repression of all opposition shows that the regime above all cares about keeping its power base.

Organized corruption and crime:

Imprisoned Christians, especially converts, are regularly offered release on bail. This often involves large amounts of money, reportedly varying between US\$2,000 and US\$150,000, forcing Christians or their families to hand over title deeds of homes and sometimes businesses. People released on bail often silence themselves due to fear of losing their family's property. The Iranian regime puts pressure on them to leave the country and forfeit their bail. It is assumed that government officials use the bail system to get rich and financially ruin those Christians.

Clan oppression:

Iran has an honor and shame culture, especially present in the rural areas. In addition, Iran has a multicultural population with some ethnic groups having strong group identities. Conversion to Christianity is often seen as betrayal of the group, which brings shame to the family. This can lead to additional pressure on converts to Christianity.

How are men and women differently affected?

WOMEN

Many house church members and leaders are women; the domestic setting provides opportunities for them to participate in ministry. While this allows many women to fulfil their calling, it makes them vulnerable. They risk being arrested during raids and sexually harassed by the authorities. Some women, particularly Muslim-background converts, are forced to marry Muslims. Pressure comes from their family and local community; single Christian women seeking employment will be viewed unfavorably in the marketplace. If already married, her children will likely be taken away to ensure they are raised as Muslims.

- Denied access to social community/networks
- Denied custody of children
- Economic harassment via work/job/business
- Enforced religious dress code
- Forced divorce
- Forced marriage
- Imprisonment by government
- Incarceration by family/house arrest
- Travel bans/restrictions on movement
- Violence - physical
- Violence - psychological
- Violence - sexual

MEN

Men, particularly pastors, are more likely to be arrested, prosecuted, and imprisoned for lengthy periods. They are usually the primary providers for their families. When converting to Christianity, men risk losing their jobs. If they apply for a business registration or permit and the officer discovers their faith, the application is likely to be refused. This puts extra financial and psychological pressure on their families. Men also face monitoring, threats and harassment. In contrast to women, male converts are not seen as 'misguided', but as willfully making wrong choices.

- Economic harassment via work/job/business
- Forced to flee town/country
- Imprisonment by government
- Violence - physical
- Violence - psychological



WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution score out of 100
2022	9	85.31
2021	8	85.60
2020	9	85.06
2019	9	85.21
2018	10	84.79

Average pressure remains at an extremely high level in Iran. The slight drop in score (less than 0.5 point) is due to technicalities. The outlook for Iranian Christians, in particular converts from Islam to Christianity, further clouded during WWL 2022. The election of hardliner Ebrahim Raisi as President and the amendment and tightening of the Penal Code fits in a wider development, in which Iran becomes more and more a totalitarian state. State surveillance is on the rise, which translates into the authorities exerting a firmer grip on daily life and activities. The scores in all spheres of life are at an extreme level.



Examples of violence in the reporting period

- **In February 2021**, (former) President Rouhani signed two controversial amendments to the Penal Code into law. The amendments widen the scope to prosecute Christians, especially converts from Islam to Christianity, as the regime defines them as members of ‘sects’ and ‘cults’.
- **In June 2021**, three converts from Islam to Christianity received the maximum sentence of five years imprisonment under the newly amended law. They belong to a group of at least 65 Christians that have been detained or sentenced to (long-term) prison sentences.

WWL Year	Churches or Christian buildings attacked or closed	Christians detained	Christians forced to marry	Christians physically or mentally abused
2022	19	49	30	114
2021	17	110	10	240

This table includes only a few categories of faith-based violence during the reporting period - see [here](#) for full results. 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.

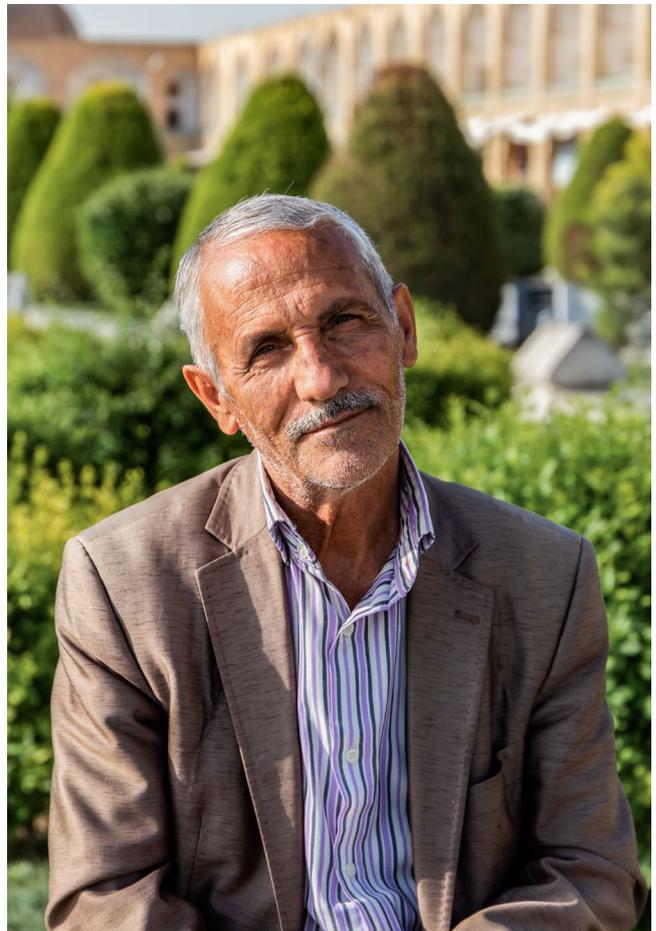
Private life

It is risky for Christians, especially converts, to express their faith publicly (such as in blogs or on social media) since the internet is monitored and this can be used as evidence prior to an arrest. Sharing Christian messages (especially in Persian) can be interpreted as an act of proselytization. Accessing online Christian materials and contacting foreign Christians are risky activities. Possessing Christian materials in Persian, especially in significant quantities, suggests they are for distribution to Muslim-background Iranians. Meetings involving converts from an Islamic background are monitored and frequently raided.

Family life

Christians cannot adopt Muslim children but Armenians and Assyrians have their own orphanages from which they can adopt. The children of converts are automatically registered as Muslim and must attend Islamic-based education, which has been further Islamized since the 1979 Revolution. Even the children of Armenian and Assyrian Christians are forced to take Islamic classes at elementary school. Opposition to this has led to court cases against parents and threats against the children involved. At university level, courses like Islamic history, Quranic teachings and Arabic are mandatory. University application forms require the applicants to indicate their religion. If a Muslim-born individual lists Christianity, he or she will not be accepted. Church leaders, and increasingly church members, are often imprisoned for long periods, which has a traumatic effect on the whole family. According to Article 881 of the Civil Code, a non-Muslim

cannot inherit property from a Muslim. Even if only one of the heirs of a non-Muslim is Muslim, that person will receive the entire inheritance.



Community life

Christians are monitored, especially if they are suspected of running a house church or engaging in evangelism. These Christians will be frequently summoned for interrogation designed to intimidate. Informers in Western countries report back to Iranian intelligence on activities of Iranian Christians abroad. All women in Iran have to cover their heads and wear the hijab. The state controls more than 60% of the economy and doing business in Iran is dependent on clientelism and cronyism. Historical Christians like the Armenians and Assyrians face discrimination when doing business, while other Christians do not stand a chance of conducting business in Iran.

National life

High positions in the government are reserved for Shia Muslims; Christians are banned from public office, except for three parliamentary seats reserved for Armenian/Assyrian Christians. Criticizing the government can be dangerous. The national media is tightly controlled and both state officials and imams have criticized Christians (typically referring to Zionism and house churches). Sexual harassment is very common, despite it being a violation of the Iranian Penal Code. Family members can harm converts with impunity.

Church life

Most church services are monitored by the police, which leads to fear for attendees. Armenian and Assyrian Christians may conduct services in their own languages as long as they do not welcome Muslim background Christians. Armenians and Assyrians also run some state-subsidized schools; however the headteachers are generally Muslim. Over the past few years, the government has intensified efforts to remove Persian-speaking Christians from Iran by shutting down churches and arresting leaders. Officially, there are hardly any Persian-speaking churches left in the country.



International obligations & rights violated

Iran has committed to respect and protect fundamental rights in 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 on the Rights of the Child (CRC)

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

- Christians are arbitrarily arrested, charged for national security crimes and sentenced without a fair trial (ICCPR Art. 9)
- Peaceful Christian religious activities are monitored and regularly disrupted by the state on national security grounds (ICCPR Arts. 18 and 21)
- Converts to Christianity are persecuted by the state because of their decision to leave Islam (ICCPR Art. 18)
- Christians from all denominations are monitored by the state, in violation of their right to privacy (ICCPR Art. 17)
- Christian children are forced to receive Islamic religious education (ICCPR Art. 18 and CRC Art. 14)
- Christians cannot inherit from Muslims and have restricted access to higher education and public employment (ICCPR Art. 26)

Situation of other religious minorities

Bahai, Sunni, Sufi (Dervish) Muslims and other religious minorities (like the Yarsanis) are also persecuted in Iran. Many dissidents from these groups have been executed, mainly on charges of terrorism (instead of ‘apostasy’). Ethnic minorities such as the Kurds, Baloch and Iranian Arabs face government suspicion and discrimination as well.



Open Doors in Iran

Open Doors supports the church in Iran through partners with online Christian multimedia initiatives and advocacy. There is a special focus on male and female leaders, women, ex-prisoners, youth, youth leaders and children.

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: © 2021 Open Doors International.
- The WWL 2022 reporting period was 01 October 2020 - 30 September 2021.
- The full Country Dossier for this country can be accessed [here](#) (password: freedom). The latest update of WWL methodology, as well as the complete WWL 2022 ranking and reports, can be found [here](#) (password: freedom).

All photos in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.
