

WORLD WATCH LIST 2023

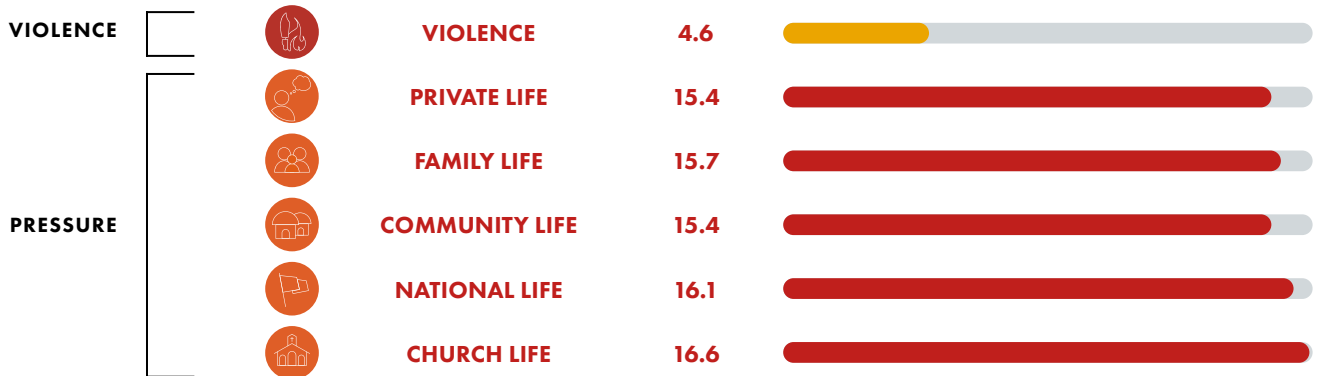
SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.
9

Afghanistan



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

Almost all Afghan Christians are converts from Islam and are not able to practice their faith openly. Leaving Islam is considered shameful and punishable by death under the prevailing Islamic law. If exposed, Christian converts have to flee the country. The family, clan or tribe must save wits “honor” and deal with any known convert. After the Taliban took over government control on 15 August 2021, most Christians tried to leave the country and/or went into hiding. The take-over proved to be a game-changer especially for women, who are confined to the walls of their homes once again, but also for ethnic and religious minorities, including Christian converts, who are seen as apostates. As the Taliban consolidates power, despite appearing to be far from unified, Christian converts have to adapt and conform to the rigid form of society implemented.

Quick facts

LEADER

Hibatullah Akhundzada
(interim Taliban government)

POPULATION

40,754,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

Thousands (OD estimate)

MAIN RELIGION

Islam

GOVERNMENT

Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan



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Context

Main Religions	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	Thousands	-

Source¹

Afghanistan has not known peace for more than 40 years. This has left the infrastructure, economy, and social fabric in ruins and led to widespread Islamic radicalization, criminal activity, and corruption. The Taliban held power over roughly three quarters of the country from 1996 until 2001. The Taliban are not a unified block; the conservative stream dominates and ideology trumps international recognition. On 15 August 2021, the Taliban took control over the country again and policies implemented so far shows that it is interested in including neither ethnic or religious minorities nor women. Girls' education from secondary level and upwards has been banned. Many ministers in the government are familiar faces from the first Taliban rule (and are on international terror lists) and most news coming out of the country points to a reprise of their harsh interpretation of Islam. The new government faces unprecedented challenges. While the COVID-19 pandemic had a strong impact on Afghanistan, most people (even more [wealthy people](#)) have been struggling with the consequences of the economic collapse in family life.

Afghanistan is extremely poor with 54.5% of the population living below the poverty line. The instability has led many farmers to rely heavily on illicit drugs like opium as a source of income. The most telling example of the changes Afghanistan went through is Kabul. When the Taliban left in 2001, this was a rather small capital with 500,000 inhabitants. Now it is a buzzing city with at least five million people. A strong increase in the numbers of internally displaced people (IDPs) and an expected increase in refugees in neighboring countries will add to instability, which is likely to affect the region as well. The UN estimates that 20 million people (almost half the population) are [facing acute hunger](#). The small Christian community faces a difficult future with the Taliban in power and the constant threats of attacks by the Islamic State of Khorasan Province (ISKP).

How the situation varies by region

The Islamic State Khorasan Province, a formidable challenger, not only continues to attack the Taliban but also targets minorities. Generally, control and supervision in rural areas is stricter than in most cities; however, the whole country is strictly Islamic, so Christians face severe difficulties wherever they are discovered by families or authorities.

¹ According to OD-estimate

Who is affected?

Communities of expatriate Christians

Expatriate Christians are included as a WWL category again as non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are beginning to (re-)staff their work in Afghanistan. Due to the moderately improved security, expatriates are not restricted to highly-secured compounds anymore. However, it is impossible for expatriate Christians to mix with other Christians and hence, they are still involuntarily isolated.

Historical Christian communities

This category is not included in the WWL scoring and analysis.

Converts to Christianity

Converts to Christianity from a Muslim background try their utmost not to be discovered by family or the wider community. Being discovered is an immediate risk to their lives.

Non-traditional Christian communities

This category is not included in the WWL scoring and analysis.

Main sources of persecution and discrimination

Islamic oppression blended with Dictatorial paranoia:

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 faith as far as possible. Muslim religious leaders will most likely be the instigators and the local authorities can be involved, too. The Taliban puts an even stronger emphasis on frequent mosque attendance, increasing the role of religious leaders. With power now in the hands of the Taliban, which is more inclined to radical Islamic views, all Afghan citizens (and especially women) face strict limitations in everyday life, inspired by Islamic tenets. Christian converts do not have any space to deviate from the behavior expected from everyone. The extreme violence used by groups related to IS (e.g. Islamic State in the Khorasan Province/ISKP) has translated into a high number of people being killed in attacks or displaced. The Taliban will do whatever it sees necessary to stay in power and keep its own movement unified.

Clan oppression blended with Ethno-religious hostility:

Conversion from Islam could be perceived as a threat to the predominantly Islamic identity of the country. The collectivistic nature of the Afghan family unit leaves little room for privacy, which means a high risk of discovery and severe compulsion from within the clan structure and wider community. Afghans are deeply

entrenched in caring for their families, villages, and tribes. If someone turns from his tribe to embrace something seen as foreign, this results in high pressure being exerted to ensure that person returns to traditional norms. Additionally, the Christian religion in particular is considered Western and hostile to Afghan culture, society, and Islam.

Organized corruption and crime:

The majority (80%) of the country's GDP comes from the informal sector. Corruption and crime are omnipresent. One problem Afghanistan faces is that growing illicit drugs, such as opium, is much more lucrative than virtually any other crop. The income from poppy cultivation funds both armed militant groups and corruption. This particularly affects Christians who tend to be from the low-income majority of society.



How are men and women differently affected?

WOMEN

The swift Taliban take-over of Afghanistan has thrown the advancement of women's rights into turmoil. Women have long been viewed as second class citizens, but under Taliban rule face additional pressures. Reflecting the downward trend of women's rights, girls' school attendance is restricted and women are barred from the workplace. According to a country expert, Christian women and girls are being targeted and abducted in order to be forcibly married to Taliban fighters, with fathers being forced to give up their daughters at the point of a gun.

- Abduction
- Denied access to social community / network
- Forced divorce
- Forced marriage
- Incarceration by family/house arrest
- Trafficking
- Violence – death
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological
- Violence – sexual
- Violence – verbal

MEN

The Taliban pressurizes men to show that they are good Muslim heads of family by praying five times a day, attending mosques, fasting and wearing a "proper" beard. Christian men face ridicule, imprisonment, torture, sexual abuse and potentially death because of their faith. Men and boys also become targets for militias seeking to coerce them into joining their groups. In light of these pressures, Christian men, particularly converts, choose to keep as low a profile as possible, with some choosing low-level positions in the workplace to avoid unwanted attention.

- Denied access to social community/networks
- Imprisonment by the government
- Violence – death
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological;
- Violence – verbal

WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution rounded score out of 100
2023	9	84
2022	1	98
2021	2	94
2020	2	93
2019	2	94

For many years, Christians in Afghanistan endured the same extreme levels of pressure as in North Korea, although by different means and actors. In terms of scoring for the spheres of life, Afghanistan and North Korea did not differ at all, scoring the maximum for each of the five spheres. However, the take-over of the government by the Taliban changed everything. It meant many Christians relocated within the country for security reasons or tried to leave the country. As a result, many house-churches closed, Christians had to leave behind everything they owned and the violence score in WWL 2022 increased to an unprecedented level of 15 points.

For WWL 2023, it was impossible to confirm that same level of violence, so the violence level dropped by 10.4 points. Incidents continue to be extremely difficult to verify since many Christians have i) gone into hiding; ii) relocated within the country; iii) tried to leave the country; and iv) disposed of their cell phones for security reasons. Another reason for the decrease in violence score is that despite their double (as convert Christians, often coming from an ethnic minority background) or even triple (as women) vulnerability, in many cases, it has been impossible to decide whether they were targeted because of their Christian faith or for other reasons, e.g. having cooperated with the former government, Western forces, NGOs etc. It has to be emphasized that this does not mean the actual level of violence necessarily dropped.

A second change is the return of the expatriate community as a separate category. As some questions across the spheres of life are limited to converts, this leads to a decrease of 3.2 points. It does not mean that the very difficult situation for converts changed at all.



Examples of violence in the reporting period

Due to security concerns, no examples of violence can be published.

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Private life

Conversion to Christianity is strictly forbidden and harshly punished. The tight-knit tribal social society means social control is high and privacy is difficult to maintain. As a result, converts run a high risk of being discovered. According to a [report](#), the Taliban already enforced cell-phone checks in the regions they controlled before taking over the government of the whole country, in order to make people follow their strict rules. Many Christian converts completely disposed of their cell phones and other devices after the Taliban take-over and relocated to other areas in an effort to hide.

Family life

The collectivistic nature of the Afghan social system means Christians must exercise extreme caution when practicing their faith as even the suspicion of having converted from Islam can lead to severe consequences like arrest or destruction of homes. There is strong pressure to divorce or nullify a marriage in the case of a Christian spouse. Since the Taliban government requires children to be raised as Muslims, Christian spouses face the loss of custody of their children. Christian converts need to play the role of a Muslim in any aspect of life.

Community life

With the Taliban take-over, this pressure has grown exponentially. The Open Doors field expert says there is no option for Christian converts other than to “play the role of a Muslim”. This includes following the dress code, attending mosque or growing a beard. 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. Christian students have to follow the general curriculum, which puts a strong emphasis on Islam. Christian girls are excluded from education like girls and women in general (although the implementation is not uniform, yet) and with many Christian converts currently relocating, children are often missing from school. It is safer to leave the country or the region as there is a likelihood of great pressure to reconvert back to the original faith. Those who chose to stay end up in serious difficulty, suffer hardship and can be killed.

National life

The Constitution, now suspended by the Taliban, guaranteed that adherents of other religions are

free to exercise their faith. However, Article 3 of the Constitution, which states that no law shall contravene the tenets and provisions of Islam, led to restrictions in many areas. Although the wording was flexible and did not state what may be deemed as inappropriate and against Islam, in practice accusations of conversion were equated with blasphemy and neither Christians nor other religious minorities (including non-Sunni Muslims) enjoyed freedom of religion. Now, the country is back to the direct rule of Sharia law and it is not clear if the Taliban plan to implement a new constitution, yet. All travel by anyone suspected of being a Christian is monitored and often hindered if authorities suspect a journey is being undertaken for faith-based reasons. The Taliban is known for their notoriously strict and frequent searches done through raids.

Church life

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. Christian groups (however small) have to be cautious about how they meet. According to the Open Doors field expert, churches are underground and held in secret. The ceremonies for church just look like a group of people meeting over a meal. All Christian material are hidden. They have to be kept safe from prying eyes lest they are discovered, forcing the people to flee or face serious consequences of violence from the local “jirga” court. There is no way of distributing or selling Bibles and other Christian materials; even sharing electronically can have life-threatening consequences if traced. Open work among young people is not possible since they risk recruitment to fight in the wars against different Taliban/ISIL-K factions. In this kind of conscription race, anyone working openly with the youth is perceived as a competitor for their hearts and minds.



International obligations & rights violated

Afghanistan 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 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)

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

- Christian converts are killed on suspicion of their faith (ICCPR Art. 6)
- Women converts are forcibly married and forced to recant their beliefs (ICCPR Art. 23.3 and CEDAW Art. 16)
- Afghans are assumed to be Muslims and are not allowed to change their religion (ICCPR Art. 18)
- Christians cannot display any religious images or symbols (ICCPR Art. 18 and 19).
- Children of Christian converts are forced to adhere to Islamic religious precepts and receive Islamic teaching (ICCPR Art. 18 and CRC Art. 14)



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Situation of other religious minorities

According to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), 2022, the year 2021 was particularly difficult for monitoring and reporting religious conditions in Afghanistan. The USCIRF report states: “With the Taliban’s return to power, religious freedom conditions in Afghanistan and the overall human rights situation significantly deteriorated in 2021. Religious minorities faced harassment, detention, and even death due to their faith or beliefs. The one known Jew and most Hindus and Sikhs fled the country. Christian converts, Baha’is, and Ahmadiyya Muslims practiced their faith in hiding due to fear of reprisal and threats from the Taliban. Years of progress toward more equitable access to education and representation of women and girls disappeared. Despite initial statements from the Taliban that they had reformed some elements of their ideology, Afghans who do not adhere to the Taliban’s harsh and strict interpretation of Sunni Islam and adherents of other faiths or beliefs are at risk of grave danger. Reports indicate that the Taliban continue to persecute religious minorities and punish residents in areas under their control in accordance with their extreme interpretation of Islamic law.” Consequently, Afghanistan was recommended for being included on the “Special Watch List”.

According to [US State Department IRFR 2021](#) (page 3): “UNAMA reported a resurgence of these attacks against the Shia Hazara group, nearly all for which ISIS-K claimed responsibility.”



Open Doors in Afghanistan

Because of the sensitive nature of our work, and the increasing risks faced by our partners and the people they serve, we cannot provide country specific information for countries in the Persian Gulf and beyond. Open Doors is active in the Persian Gulf countries through the ALIVE network of partner churches, but we cannot give details of our work.

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: © 2023 Open Doors International.
- The WWL 2023 reporting period was 01 October 2021 - 30 September 2022.
- 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 2023 ranking and reports - can be found [here](#) (password: freedom).

All photos in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.
