

WORLD WATCH LIST 2023

SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.
5

Libya



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

Since the toppling of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011, Libya has suffered a civil war. A mixture of tribal groups and radical Islamic groups, supported by different foreign countries, all fight for (oil) wealth and power. The UN-supported Government of National Unity, the latest attempt to restore a central government, tried to organize elections but failed. Since March 2022 both the country's western and eastern regions have their own prime ministers, with tensions regularly turning violent.

Libyan Christians with a Muslim background face intense pressure from their family and community to renounce their faith. Foreigners from other parts of the African continent are also targeted by various Islamic militant groups and organized criminal groups. These groups kidnap Christians and there have been instances in which Christians have been brutally killed. Even when they do not face such a

fate, Christians from Sub-Saharan Africa are harassed and subjected to threats from radical Muslims. Christians who publicly express their faith and try to share the Christian faith with others also face the risk of arrest and violent opposition. The absence of a single central government to impose law and order in the country has made the situation for Christians precarious. The level of violence against Christians in Libya is now categorized as “extreme”.

Quick facts

LEADER

Interim Prime Minister Abdul Hamid Mohammed Dbeibah

POPULATION

7,041,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

35,400¹

MAIN RELIGION

Islam

GOVERNMENT

In transition



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Context

Main Religions	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	34,600	0.5
Muslims	6,970,000	99.0
Hindus	6,200	0.1
Buddhists	19,300	0.3

Source²

Life in Libya since the toppling of dictator Gaddafi in 2011 has been characterized by civil war. UN-recognized governments supported largely by Islamist groups, centered in the west of the country around the capital Tripoli, are in conflict with a rival government in the east of the country supported by Field Marshall Khalifa Haftar and his forces. Both factions are supported by foreign backers striving for influence. The battle for Libya has become a showdown between two opposing blocs which divide the Sunni Middle East. On one side is the Turkey-

Qatar axis, which supports political Islam (Islamism). On the other side is the United Arab Emirates-Saudi-Arabia-Egypt axis, which views political Islamists as an existential threat to their rule and hence supports their opponents.

Virtually all Muslims belong to Sunni Islam. The Amazigh (Berber) ethnic minority includes some Ibadi Muslims. There are significant numbers of Christians among sub-Saharan African and Egyptian migrants. Almost all non-Muslims are foreigners; the number of Libyan Christians from a Muslim background remains very low. Both the transitional Constitutional Declaration (2011) and the 2017 Draft Constitution declare Islam the country’s religion and Sharia law the main source of legislation. The risk of physical assault, including abductions, torture, unlawful killing and sexual assault and rape, is high for Christians. Violent armed groups, pursuing their own interpretation of Islam, are responsible for such attacks and abuses. Christian migrants and refugees in Libya also encounter discrimination from their employers, criminal groups, and fellow inmates in immigration detention centers.

¹ Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2022)

² Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2022)

How the situation varies by region

Christians are at risk all over the country, but are especially vulnerable in areas where radical Islamic groups are active. This is particularly the case in the region around Sirte which is notorious for the presence of radical Islamic groups (including elements of IS). To the east, radical Islamist groups are present in both rural and urban areas such as Benghazi.

Who is affected?

Communities of expatriate Christians

Christian migrant workers (most of them from sub-Saharan Africa and Egypt) are allowed to meet in the small number of remaining churches in the west of the country, although many stay away out of fear. Under no circumstances are Libyans allowed to attend these churches. Some expatriate Christians enjoy limited freedom, but constantly face threats of kidnapping and other forms of abuse. Sub-Saharan African Christians are doubly vulnerable to persecution and discrimination based on race and religion. Christian migrants traveling through Libya on their way to Europe are subject to forms of severe abuse.

Historical Christian communities

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

Converts to Christianity

The very small group of Libyan nationals who are Christians keep their faith secret. Libyans are forbidden to attend worship in official churches. The number of Libyan Christians from a Muslim background is very low, but with the appearance of Christian programs on satellite TV and Christian websites in Arabic, interest in Christianity is increasing.

Non-traditional Christian communities

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

Main sources of persecution and discrimination

Islamic oppression:

Libya has a deeply Islamic culture, and converts from Islam to Christianity face immense pressure from family and community. Following Gaddafi's downfall, various radical Islamic groups have gained influence and control in society. At a local level, imams or sheikhs are known to incite hatred against Christians, especially migrants and converts. At the national level, radical Madkhalism Islamic scholars exert influence via both satellite television and the internet. Sharia law is upheld throughout the country. These factors have combined to result in a sharp increase in violence against Christians over the last decade.

Clan oppression:

Libya's society is conservative and tribal. Converting from Islam to Christianity is not only seen as a betrayal of Islam, but of family and tribe. Additionally, due to issues of ethnicity and racism, migrants from sub-Saharan countries are fiercely discriminated against.

Organized corruption and crime:

Corruption is common, exacerbated by a lack of rule of law and impunity. This source is blended with Islamic oppression, since some Islamic militant groups work with or act as organized criminal groups and engage in human trafficking and other criminal activities. These groups have been known to engage in rape, take hostages and trade in slaves.



How are men and women differently affected?

WOMEN

Women have a lower position within Libyan family life than men, caused by tribal norms corresponding to Sharia. If suspected of being interested in Christianity, a woman can face house arrest, sexual assault, forced marriage, or even death. Women who experience sexual violence because of their faith, sometimes as a form of punishment, encounter social and cultural barriers to the prosecution of any offense. Christian migrant women crossing Libya are also vulnerable to abduction and trafficking, especially when separated from their male companions, such as in migrant detention centers.

- Abduction
- Denied access to Christian religious materials, teachings, and rites
- Denied access to social community / networks
- Enforced religious dress code
- Forced marriage
- Incarceration by family / house arrest
- Trafficking
- Violence – death
- Violence – psychological
- Violence – sexual

MEN

In general, men face high risks of physical violence in Libya due to an ongoing cycle of violence, atrocities, and impunity. Libyan Christian men from a Muslim background in particular face loss of employment, physical and mental abuse, and eviction from their family home. Forced labor and slavery are widespread for sub-Saharan men who have migrated to Libya, including Christians. Libyan men and boys have been increasingly forced to fight in militias, causing many to flee their hometowns to evade such a fate. Migrant Christians in detention camps are also forcibly recruited.

- Abduction
- Economic harassment via work / job / business
- Forced out of home – expulsion
- Imprisonment by the government
- Military/militia conscription / service against conscience
- Trafficking
- Violence – death
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological

WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution rounded score out of 100
2023	5	88
2022	4	91
2021	4	92
2020	4	90
2019	4	87

Libya's score dropped by three points compared to WWL 2022. This was mainly caused by a decrease in reported violence, although the violence score is still categorized as very high. The scores in all spheres of life remain at extreme levels. Although the country stabilized to a certain extent and saw less direct conflict during the WWL 2023 reporting period, the overall vulnerability of Christians in the country remains extremely high.



Examples of violence in the reporting period

- Several church buildings and other places of Christian worship, mostly belonging to Sub-Saharan African Christians, were attacked and demolished or damaged.
- Several Sub-Saharan African Christians were kidnapped for ransom.
- Several Christian migrants held in detention centers in Libya (mostly from Sub-Saharan African countries) have reportedly been raped and beaten.
- One Christian from a Muslim background received a death sentence.

WWL Year	Churches or Christian buildings attacked or closed	Christians detained	Christians abducted	Christians physically and mentally abused
2023	8	15	19	200
2022	3	1	10*	100*

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

Christians in Libya hardly have the courage to inform others about their faith because of the danger from relatives, society, and radical Islamic groups. While proselytization is not explicitly prohibited, “instigating division” and “insulting Islam” is. Discussing one’s Christian faith with a Muslim could be interpreted as an act of evangelism.

Family life

Religious education is based on Islamic principles. Almost all expatriate Christians have left the country, and the main group of Christians currently consists of sub-Saharan migrants and some Egyptian Copts. Their children, if they go to school, must attend Islamic instruction and are vulnerable to harassment.

Community life

The majority of Libyans are of Arab or Berber descent. Many Christians are sub-Saharan expatriates seeking better economic opportunities. They face discrimination due to both their religion and race.

National life

Converts can be harmed or killed with impunity when attacks are carried out by family members, it can be considered a matter of family honor. Other Christians can be killed with impunity by both radical groups

and government officials. Sub-Saharan Christians are especially vulnerable in this regard. Foreign Christians must be careful not to cause provocation by criticizing the government in any way. Even the few registered church buildings are careful not to have religious symbols outside their buildings, since the public display of Christian symbols is considered an indirect form of proselytization. It can attract serious punishment from the authorities and even public lynching.

Church life

Depending on the region, migrants can gather in churches, but face serious security risks. To bring Arabic Christian literature and Bibles into the country remains strictly forbidden. Proselytizing or missionary activity among Muslims is officially prohibited.



International obligations & rights violated

Libya 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)

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

- Christians are targeted and killed by extremist groups on the basis of their faith (ICCPR Art. 6)
- Christians are harassed and targeted for wearing religious symbols (ICCPR Art. 18)
- Christian converts are tortured and pressured to recant their conversion from Islam (ICCPR Arts. 7 and 18)
- Christians are arrested and detained on blasphemy charges for sharing Christian material online (ICCPR Arts. 18 and 19)



Situation of other religious minorities

Ibadi and Sufi Muslims in Libya who do not belong to the Sunni Islamic traditions face violations in the form of violent attacks by Sunni militant groups. They also face general discrimination in society. In addition, atheists and those who openly question Sunni Islamic doctrine are very much at risk.



Open Doors in Libya

Open Doors raises prayer for believers in Libya.

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).

Many photos in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.
