

# WORLD WATCH LIST 2024

SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

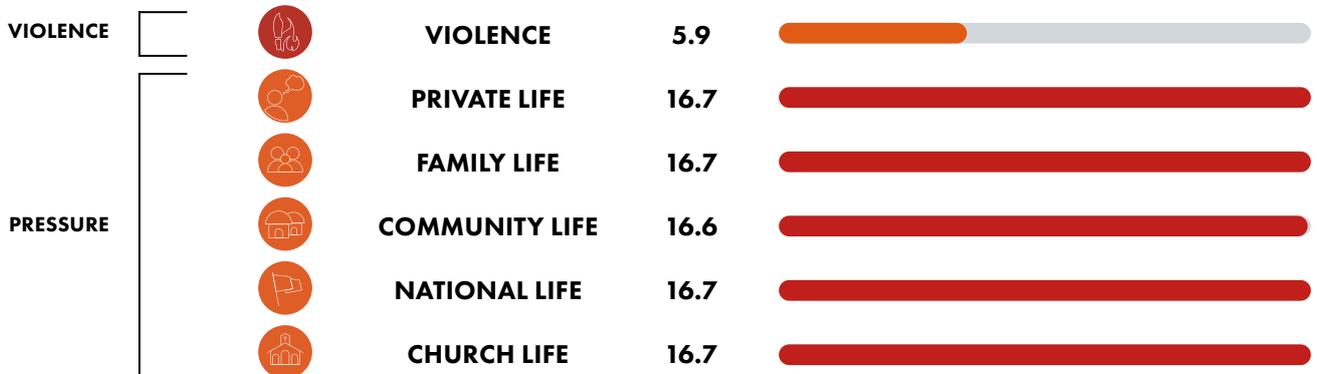
WORLD WATCH LIST NO.  
**5**

## YEMEN



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### 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

The church in Yemen is composed mostly of converts from a Muslim background and their children, who need to live out their faith in secret. They face violations of religious freedom from the authorities (including detention and interrogation), family and radical Islamic groups who threaten apostates with death. Yemeni tribal identity is heavily entangled with Islamic identity. Therefore, Christians face severe community pressure and violence from their tribe for leaving Islam. Converts to Christianity who are married to Muslims risk forced divorce and loss of custody of their children. Christians are suffering from the general humanitarian crisis in the country, but Yemeni Christians are additionally vulnerable as emergency relief is distributed preferentially through mosques to local Muslims, who discriminate against those not considered to be devout Muslims.

## Quick facts

### LEADER

Chairperson, Presidential Council  
Rashad Muhammad al-Alimi

### POPULATION

31,818,000

### NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

A small number (OD estimate)

### MAIN RELIGION

Islam

### GOVERNMENT

In transition



## Context

| Religious Context | Number of adherents | Percentage |
|-------------------|---------------------|------------|
| Christians        | A small number      | -          |

Source<sup>1</sup>

In 2014, the Houthis (a Shia Muslim minority group), frustrated by the policies of President Hadi's regime, aligned themselves with the military and took control of the capital, Sana'a. Hadi fled to Saudi Arabia, which then formed a coalition to reinstall him, protect its own border, prevent Yemen from splintering and counteract the influence of Iran, the Shia regional rival to majority-Sunni Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia expected its air power to quickly defeat the Houthi insurgency, but the civil war has dragged on, resulting in nearly 100,000 deaths and 250,000 displaced people. Nearly 80% of the population lives in poverty according to World Bank data. As is often the case within war zones, minorities are particularly vulnerable, as violent extremist groups such as Islamic State (IS) and Al-Qaeda can act with impunity against those they wish to harm.

Yemen is an authoritarian Islamic republic and Sharia (Islamic law) is the principal source of law according to the 1994 constitution. According to Middle East Concern: "Blasphemy, defamation of religions and non-Islamic proselytizing is prohibited. Apostasy is a criminal offense, punishable by death for apostates

who refuse to recant. Islamic personal status laws apply, including a prohibition on marriage between a Muslim and an apostate and between a Muslim woman and a non-Muslim man. There is no formal registration process for non-Islamic religious groups, and the government has not authorized construction of non-Islamic places of worship for many years."

In the interests of security, no WCD breakdown of religions can be published. Open Doors estimates 'a few thousand' Christians. Before the current civil war began in 2015, there were thousands of expatriates, often working in development, who were allowed to worship in registered churches in Aden and Sana'a. Most of these Christians have been forced to leave the country due to the dangerous situation, and some of their churches have been ransacked. Now most of the country's Christians are indigenous converts. They are at great risk of being killed by their families, clans and tribes. There are also large numbers of Ethiopian and Eritrean Christian refugees residing in Yemen.

## How the situation varies by region

The situation is dangerous for Christians in Yemen. Some areas are particularly threatening, such as in the south, where there is a strong Al-Qaeda presence. Converts from Islam to Christianity have also indicated that there is more pressure in the Shiite Houthi-controlled areas in the north (comprising

<sup>1</sup> According to OD-estimate

approximately one-third of Yemen's territory) than in areas under the control of the Sunni Hadi government. However, a source connected to migrant Christians of traditional Christian backgrounds has said that they experience fewer restrictions in Houthi-controlled areas than elsewhere. Houthi-controlled areas are heavily policed and any dissenting opinion is rigorously repressed and likely to lead to imprisonment and torture.

## Who is affected?

### Communities of expatriate Christians

Almost all Western expats have left the country because of the war for security reasons. In a combination of racial discrimination and violations of religious freedom, migrant Christians who are left behind face intimidation from society and violence from radical Islamic movements. However, because

their numbers have declined significantly and the Church is now mostly made up of native Christians, the expatriate Christian category is currently not scored in the WWL analysis.

### Historical Christian communities

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

### Converts to Christianity

At least 95% of the Yemeni church is made up of converts from Islam. Vulnerability of converts remains very high throughout the country due to traditional family/community/tribal attitudes, the impunity with which radical Islamic groups are able to operate and the refusal of state (or de facto state) authorities to tolerate any form of dissent.

### Non-traditional Christian communities

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

## Main sources of persecution and discrimination

### Islamic oppression

The Yemeni Constitution declares Islam the state religion and Sharia the source of all legislation. Proselytism is prohibited, and Muslims are forbidden from converting. Islam is a key part of Yemeni tribal identity, while militant organizations such as the Houthis, Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and IS seek to implement a puritanical form of Islam. They are the main drivers of this Islamic oppression and have actively targeted and killed Christians.

### Clan oppression

Yemeni society is primarily tribal, with central government authority often playing a secondary role in terms of governance. Islamic identity is intertwined with ethnic identity. In many areas, tribal elders enforce tribal law and custom, which prohibits members from leaving or marrying outside the tribe, especially to a Christian. Punishment for disobedience can be death or banishment.

### Dictatorial paranoia

Yemen has been under a dictatorship since 2012. Within the context of conflict, the survival instinct

of warring parties is strong. In Houthi-controlled areas, increasingly harsh measures were being taken by the Houthi administration against individuals or associations deemed to be a threat by the ruling authority. This has continued and includes members of religious minority communities.

### Organized corruption and crime

Christians are particularly likely to be victims of crime since they are often viewed as foreigners and associated with the West. They are vulnerable since the lack of rule of law provides greater impunity to those who commit crimes against them.



## How are men and women differently affected?

### Women

Within Yemen's patriarchal, Islamic context, a female converting to Christianity is considered shameful for her family. Typically, female converts from a Muslim background will be denied their phone and isolated in the home. They might further be physically and mentally abused, raped or even killed to "restore the honor" of the tribe or family. Forced marriage to a strict Muslim is a potential solution to bring a young convert into line. Due to strict family monitoring, women have limited access to information about Christianity, resulting in fewer women becoming Christians.

#### Female typical pressure points:

- Denied access to Christian religious materials, teachings and rites
- Forced divorce
- Forced marriage
- Incarceration by family (house arrest)
- Violence – death
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological
- Violence – sexual

### Men

Life in general in Yemen is tremendously difficult in an ongoing war with no religious freedom. Christian men and boys can be forced to join militias. When dragged into war, it affects their education and future, not just because of the amount of time it takes from their lives, but also because of the highly-controlled Islamic environment in which training takes place. Male converts to Christianity primarily face pressure in the public sphere; they risk losing their job, being beaten and being imprisoned. Consequently, many Christian men flee the country.

#### Male typical pressure points:

- Economic harassment via business/job/work access
- Forced out of home – expulsion
- Forced to flee town/country
- Imprisonment by government
- Military/militia conscription/service against conscience
- Violence – physical

## WWL 5 year trend

| WWL Year | Position on Open Doors World Watch List | Persecution rounded score out of 100 |
|----------|---|--------------------------------------|
| 2024     | 5                                       | 89                                   |
| 2023     | 3                                       | 89                                   |
| 2022     | 5                                       | 88                                   |
| 2021     | 7                                       | 87                                   |
| 2020     | 8                                       | 85                                   |

*Yemen's score remains more or less unchanged at 89 points. All scores for pressure in the 5 Spheres of Life are at the maximum possible or close to it. Violence remained at the same level of 5.9 points. The Church in Yemen is composed mostly of Yemeni Christians with a Muslim background and their children who need to live out their faith in secret. They face violations of religious freedom from their family and the authorities (both from the official authorities and from Houthi rebels acting as local authorities in one-third of the country) as well as from radical Islamic groups.*



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# Examples of violence in the reporting period

For security reasons, no details can be published here.

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## Private life

All Yemenis are considered Muslims. Converts to Christianity run the risk of honor killing or physical violence if their families or communities discover their faith. Private worship has become particularly risky for Christians in areas controlled by radical Muslims. AQAP and IS control large parts of the country.

## Family life

As Yemeni society is strictly Muslim, there is immense familial pressure against conversion, seen as a shameful insult to the family's honor. Any Christian ritual or celebration must be held in secret. For Yemeni Christians from a Muslim background with children, there is strong family and societal pressure to ensure that children are brought up according to Islamic norms. There is a high risk of loss of custody if the new faith of their parents is discovered. Disapproving families often seek to 'correct' a young convert through an arranged marriage to a conservative Muslim spouse. Further refusal can lead to imprisonment, 'honor' killing by family members or an attack by militant Islamic groups.

## Community life

The ongoing conflict and resulting humanitarian crisis have created exceedingly difficult conditions for Christians in Yemen. New converts whose faith is discovered face pressure to recant. Refusing to recant results in, at best, imprisonment or violence, and, at worst, killing. Communal pressure is more

likely in rural villages, where religious leaders are more integrated with families and privacy is more difficult. Christian converts who hide their faith are considered less devout Muslims because they do not (or less often) attend mosque. As a result, they are deprioritized in the distribution of food and aid.

## National life

According to Yemen's criminal code, conversion from Islam to another religion is apostasy, which is a capital offense. In employment, if managers suspect that an employee is Christian, then it is practically impossible for him to receive a promotion. Perpetrators of crimes against Christians, including so-called 'honor crimes', are likely to receive impunity given the weak rule of law in much of Yemen. Tribal justice systems (which are widely applicable) expect the head of the family to carry out punishment. In more official systems, Islamic principles are likely to be applied, which will greatly disadvantage converts from Islam.

## Church life

The three official church buildings (all located in Aden, on Yemen's south coast) which served expatriate Christians or refugees (mainly Ethiopian) have been damaged in the war and are closed. Christians may only meet at secret locations. Distribution of religious materials is forbidden by law and the punishment is severe. Churches that organize humanitarian efforts risk being attacked.



# International obligations & rights violated

Yemen 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)

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

- Christian converts are pressured by the state and society to recant their conversion (ICCPR Art. 18)
- Christians suffer from biased distribution of emergency relief because of their faith (ICCPR Art. 26)
- Christian converts, male and female, face divorce and lose custody of their children because of their conversion (ICCPR Art. 23 and CEDAW Art. 16)
- Distribution of non-Islamic religious material is forbidden by law (ICCPR Arts. 18 and 19)
- Female Christian converts are forced to house imprisonment and held hostage because of their faith (ICCPR Arts. 9 and 12 and CEDAW Art. 15)



## Situation of other religious minorities

Other religious minorities facing rights violations in Yemen include Bahai and Jews. Radical Muslims consider Bahais to be infidels and so they are discriminated against. They can be imprisoned and tortured, mostly by Houthi authorities. They also face pressure to recant their faith. The tiny Jewish community, mostly based in the capital, is viewed by Houthi rebels as the enemy. The Houthis also impose limitations on the freedom of Sunni Muslims.

### Open Doors in Yemen

Open Doors supports Christians in Yemen through organizing prayer and training for Christians and pastors. We also distribute humanitarian aid to Christians and those interested in Christianity. We offer shelter and protection to persecuted Christians and give training and livelihood to Christians and their relatives.



### 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.*

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