

WORLD WATCH LIST 2024

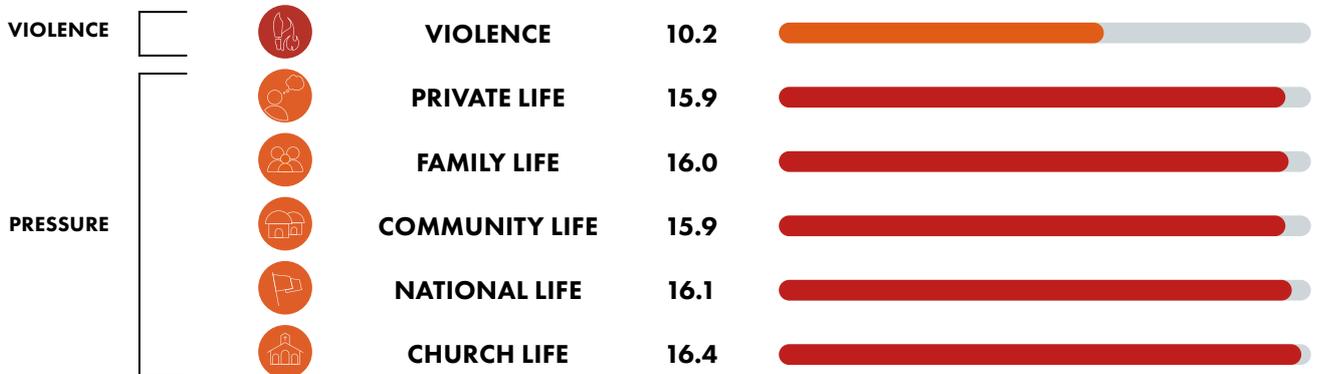
SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.
3

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

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 categorized as “very high”. Libyan Christians with a Muslim background face intense pressure from their family and community to renounce their faith. Most practice their faith in secret. Foreign Christians from other parts of the African continent are targeted by various Islamic militant groups and organized criminal groups, who threaten, kidnap and occasionally brutally kill them.

Quick facts

LEADER

Interim Prime Minister Abdul Hamid Mohammed Dbeibah

POPULATION

7,119,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

35,100¹

MAIN RELIGION

Islam

GOVERNMENT

In transition



Context

Religious Context	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	35,100	0.5
Muslims	7,046,000	99.0
Buddhists	20,200	0.3
Hindus	6,700	0.1

Source²

Since the toppling of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011, Libya has become divided into several groups and suffers from high levels of lawlessness. UN-recognized governments supported largely by Islamist groups, mostly 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.

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. The number of Libyan Christians from a Muslim background remains very low. These Christians face violent pressure from family, community and the government to renounce their faith.

Before Gaddafi fell from power in 2011, many Coptic Christians from Egypt lived and worked in the country. However, since Gaddafi's toppling most of them have returned to their home countries, especially following the beheading of 21 Coptic Christians in February 2015 followed by the murder of 30 Ethiopian Christians in April 2015 by Islamic State (IS) militants.

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. Christian migrants and refugees in Libya also encounter discrimination from their employers, criminal groups, and fellow inmates in immigration detention centers.

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, but radical Islamist groups are also present in cities such as Benghazi (east) and the capital Tripoli (west).

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)

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. They face threats of kidnapping and other forms of abuse. Under no circumstances are Libyans allowed to attend these churches. Sub-Saharan African Christians are doubly vulnerable to persecution and discrimination based on race and religion.

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 from attending worship in official churches. With the appearance of Christian programs on satellite TV and Christian websites in Arabic, interest in Christianity is increasing. Interest in these programs increased after the wave of public arrests of Christian converts to Christianity, as many Libyans were previously not aware Libyan Christians existed.

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.

Female typical pressure points:

- 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

Generally, men face a higher risk of physical violence in Libya, against a backdrop of considerable volatility. Christian men face loss of employment, physical and mental abuse, and eviction from their family home. 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, too, are forcibly recruited. Forced labor and slavery are widespread for sub-Saharan men who have migrated to Libya, including Christians, who can also be abducted for ransom.

Male typical pressure points:

- Abduction
- Denied access to social community/networks
- Economic harassment via business/job/work access
- Forced out of home – expulsion
- Imprisonment by 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
2024	3	91
2023	5	88
2022	4	91
2021	4	92
2020	4	90

The rise in score was due mainly to an increase in the violence score - 9.1 points in WWL 2023 rising to 10.2 points in WWL 2024, following a major incident in May 2023 during which several converts from Islam to Christianity and expatriate Christians were arrested. Pressure remained stable at an extreme level.



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Examples of violence in the reporting period

- **February 2023:** Six Coptic Christians were abducted and kept captive in Western Libya ([AP News, 17 February 2023](#)). Although kidnappings for ransom are not uncommon in Libya, it is likely that their Christian faith made them additionally vulnerable.
- **In March 2023:** At least six Libyan Christians from a Muslim background were arrested, with the authorities trying to force them (under torture) to recant their faith ([The Guardian, 3 May 2023](#)).
- **In March 2023:** At least one foreign Christian was arrested and forcibly expelled from the country following accusations of proselytizing ([The Guardian, 3 May 2023](#)).
- During the WWL 2024 reporting period, hundreds of migrants have been arbitrarily arrested by Libyan authorities, including Christians from sub-Saharan Africa and Egypt. It is believed that at least several of them were also targeted because of their Christian faith. Reports of widespread human trafficking, (sexual) abuse, torture and extortion have been coming out of Libya for years now. Their faith makes Christian migrants extra vulnerable to such abuse, forcing most of them to keep their faith a strict secret.

WWL Year	Churches or Christian buildings attacked or closed	Christians detained	Christians imprisoned or punished by the government	Christians physically and mentally abused
2024	9	31	10*	100*
2023	8	15	4	200*

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

While proselytization is not explicitly prohibited, “instigating division” and “insulting Islam” is, so Christians in Libya mostly refrain from telling their relatives and community about their faith. 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. Many 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. If known to be Christian, Libyan converts from Islam to Christianity face extremely high levels of pressure from community members to recant their faith (in addition to pressure from their families and the government). Many Christians in Libya 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 mob violence. The Taliban is known for their notoriously strict and frequent searches done through raids.

Church life

Depending on the region, migrants can gather in (house) 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 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)

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.



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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).

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