

WORLD WATCH LIST 2024

SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

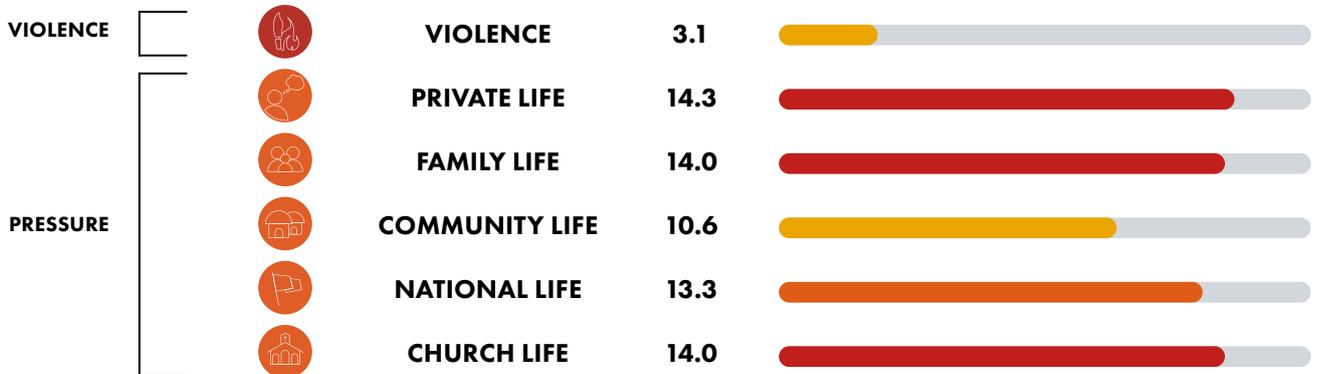
WORLD WATCH LIST NO.
31

OMAN



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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

There are two categories of Christians in Oman: expatriate Christians and converts from Islam to Christianity. Converts are put under pressure from family and society to recant their faith. They can be expelled from their jobs and homes and face problems with child custody and inheritance. Expatriate Muslims converting to Christianity experience similar pressures as in their home countries, as they are often living within their own national or ethnic communities. Expatriate Christian communities are tolerated, but their facilities are restricted and meetings are monitored to record any political statements and the attendance of any Omani nationals. All religious organizations must be registered with the authorities.

Quick facts

LEADER

Sultan Haytham bin Tariq Al Said

POPULATION

5,412,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

196,000¹

MAIN RELIGION

Islam

GOVERNMENT

Absolute Monarchy



Context

Religious Context	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	196,000	3.6
Muslims	4,859,000	89.8
Hindus	275,000	5.1
Buddhists	32,200	0.6

Source²

The country is ruled by a monarch (Sultan Haitham bin Tariq since January 2020) and classed as authoritarian.

According to Middle East Concern (MEC Oman report): “The Basic Law of Oman establishes Islam as the religion of the State and Islamic law as the basis of legislation. The Ministry of Endowments and Islamic Affairs closely regulates and monitors religious activities, including Islamic activities... Only approved messages can be given within mosques... Non-Muslim worship is only permitted on premises officially designated for that purpose, on land donated by the Sultan.” “Expatriate Christians enjoy considerable freedom in Oman, provided their activities are restricted to designated compounds and that they avoid interaction with Muslims that could be construed as proselytism.”

Just like all other Omanis and expatriates in the country, Christians and churches are well aware that their online activities are monitored and that they need to avoid discussing sensitive issues in public.

Most Omanis practice a brand of Islam unique to Oman called Ibadism, which has been characterized as “moderate conservatism”, a mixture of austerity and tolerance. According to [experts](#), Ibadis do not believe in violence against those who leave Islam and tend to tolerate Christians, leading to Oman being internationally presented as a model of tolerance and diplomacy. However, pressure on Omani converts from Islam to Christianity (and on expatriate Christians involved in proselytizing) remains very high.

Most Christians are expatriates, concentrated in urban areas and come from the Philippines, India and Western countries.

How the situation varies by region

Omani society is still very tribal and levels of pressure on Christians tend to be higher in rural areas than in urban areas (e.g., Muscat). Social and family control is generally higher in rural areas, while urban areas offer the possibility for converts to live a more anonymous life.

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

There are a number of expatriate communities (including Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox and Protestant), located mainly in urban areas such as Muscat and Sohar in the north and Salalah in the south. Their facilities are restricted in order not to offend nationals.

Historical Christian communities

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

Converts to Christianity

Converts to Christianity from Islam risk isolation and pressure to renounce their faith from family and society. They can also lose child custody, as the law prohibits a father who leaves Islam from retaining paternal rights over his children.

Non-traditional Christian communities

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



Main sources of persecution and discrimination

Islamic oppression

Converts to Christianity from an Omani Muslim background face the highest levels of pressure from family, who see conversion as a betrayal of family honor and will likely expel converts from their home. For converts from Islam originating from elsewhere (e.g., Pakistan or the Levant), much depends on the response within their surrounding community in Oman. As long as they do not create unrest, they have less to fear from the Omani government, although their Omani employers can fire them, which would result in deportation if they could not find another job. Conversion is not recognized by the government and Omani converts have been interrogated by officials, commanded to stop meeting, and have faced legal problems and threats of losing their jobs and homes. Proselytizing is illegal and punishable under the law. No Christians have been officially prosecuted for proselytizing, but some have been expelled from the country without due process in recent years.

Clan oppression

Tribal values are blended with Islamic values: to be Omani is to be Muslim, and to leave the faith is a dishonor and shame to family and society. Converts face the risk of being ostracized or subjected to immense pressure to return to Islam.

Dictatorial paranoia

Freedom House rates the country as “not free” (Freedom House/Global Freedom 2023) and states: “The regime restricts virtually all political rights and civil liberties, imposing criminal penalties for criticism and dissent.” The media also faces harassment and intimidation. Pressure on Christians in this regard has further increased under the new Sultan, with most Christians applying strict self-censorship to avoid accusations of proselytization or criticizing the government.

How are men and women differently affected?

Women

Women are in a vulnerable position in Oman’s conservative society, where fathers, husbands and male guardians exert significant control over their lives. Women have no voice in society, so are not expected to have their own religious opinions. It is extremely difficult for women to convert to Christianity, facing house arrest and being isolated from other Christians. Unmarried converts may also be pressured to marry a Muslim to force them to return to Islam. Housemaids, many of whom are Christian domestic migrant workers, experience sexual abuse and slave-like treatment.

Female typical pressure points:

- Denied access to social community/networks
- Denied custody of children
- Denied legal ability to marry Christian spouse
- Enforced religious dress code
- Forced marriage
- Incarceration by family (house arrest)
- Violence – physical
- Violence – sexual
- Violence – verbal

Men

It is very difficult for Muslim men to convert to Christianity in Oman. Converts risk social ostracism from families and communities. They are likely to lose the financial support of their families and the necessary connections to find or maintain a job in Oman’s network-based society. This impacts dependent family members, as men are traditionally their family’s breadwinners. If married, he will lose custody of his children and he might be divorced. Converts may also be exiled from their home, placing them in an extremely vulnerable position.

Male typical pressure points:

- Denied access to social community/networks
- Denied custody of children
- Discrimination/harassment via education
- Economic harassment via business/job/work access
- Violence – verbal

WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution rounded score out of 100
2024	31	69
2023	47	65
2022	36	66
2021	44	63
2020	42	62

The rise of 4 points was due to an increase in the violence score (from 0.6 points to 3.1) and an increase in the pressure score, above all in the Church sphere. This was caused by several incidents involving the community of converts from Islam to Christianity.



Examples of violence in the reporting period

- Christians in Oman, especially known converts from a Muslim background, are strictly monitored by the security services, forcing them into self-censorship. Due to the sensitive nature of those incidents, no further details can be published.
- Most Omani converts from Islam to Christianity keep their new faith hidden. They are highly aware of the volatile consequences of breaking family norms and have seen and heard of the consequences for those converts in Oman and other Gulf countries who have revealed their new faith; severe physical, mental and emotional abuse by family members.
- The expatriate Christian community remains monitored and is frequently obliged to self-censor.

Private life

Expatriate Christians who publicly talk about their Christian faith can be accused of proselytism, which can lead to deportation. Oman is one of the few countries where Islam is the state religion, but conversion is not a crime as long as it is not done publicly. Given the tribal culture, however, a convert will be ostracized and lose all social security normally provided by the family.

Family life

All children born to Omani parents, including converts to Christianity, are considered Muslim. Non-Muslim children cannot be exempted from compulsory Islamic classes within state schools. A convert husband will lose his right to custody upon divorce (this would not be different for a convert wife, but women, in general, have custody rights).

Community life

Christians, especially converts and expatriates suspected of evangelism, are monitored by the government and society, who will inform the security services if they are aware of any “suspicious circumstances” or disruptions of societal norms. They can be harassed or interrogated by the police. In a tribal society like Oman, employment is usually obtained via (family) relationships. Known Omani converts face significant challenges in obtaining employment. Christian expatriate workers may experience discrimination. Their Christian faith is an extra vulnerability in this regard, although racism is a prevailing factor.

National life

The Omani Constitution (Article 28) only guarantees the “freedom to practice religious rites” under the condition that they “do not ... contradict morals”.

Hence, there is no freedom to convert from Islam to Christianity. Christians will try to keep a low political profile in order to avoid provoking a hostile reaction from the government. Only Christian organizations offering a clear benefit to Omani society (e.g., a hospital) are welcomed.

Church life

Churches apply self-censorship and are careful not to organize public activities or print large quantities of Christian material that would be interpreted as proselytism. The government would likely act against any church that integrates converts. The publication, importing and distribution of religious materials are heavily regulated; churches are no longer allowed to use their own channels for importing Bibles.



International obligations & rights violated

Oman has committed to respect and protect fundamental rights under the following international treaties:

1. International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)
2. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)
3. Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)

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

- Children of Christian converts are forced to receive Muslim religious education and to participate in religious ceremonies and festivals that are not in line with their religious beliefs (CRC Art. 14)
- Female converts to Christianity do not have the option of marrying a Christian spouse, as women registered as Muslims are legally restricted from marrying a non-Muslim (CEDAW Article 16)

Situation of other religious minorities

Hindus, Buddhists and non-Ibadi Muslims are relatively free to practice their own beliefs. The US State Department (IRFR 2022 Oman) states that other non-Muslim groups are relatively free to gather in designated areas, but that overcrowding remains a problem; they also continue to meet in private locations, although this is officially prohibited. In addition, they also struggle to register themselves with the government, as procedures are not clear. According to the report, all imams have to be licensed by the government and mosques are not allowed to let unlicensed imams preach. In addition, all licensed imams “must deliver sermons within ‘politically and socially acceptable’ parameters”. The government introduced these measures to avoid political discontent being expressed in the mosques.

Atheism is viewed with suspicion in Oman. During a two-day symposium at the Sultan Qaboos University, entitled “Atheism and the trust of monotheism”, atheism was described as a “behavioral psychological problem”. The event was attended by high-ranking (religious) officials, including the Grand Mufti ([Oman Observer, 24 May 2022](#)).



Open Doors in Oman

Open Doors raises prayer support for the believers and church in the Arabian Peninsula.



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.
