

WORLD WATCH LIST 2025

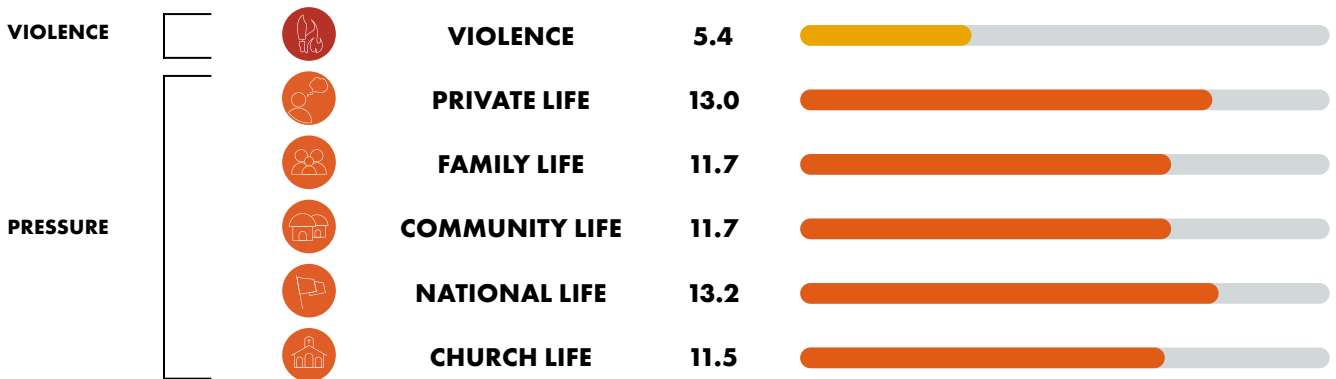
SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

TÜRKIYE

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.
45



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

Nationalism and Islam are intrinsically linked and anyone who is not a Muslim, particularly a convert or someone who openly lives out their different faith, is not seen to be a loyal Turk. The government has started to target foreign (Western) Christians, and has also banned foreign Christians with Turkish spouses and children from the country. Conversion from Islam to Christianity is not legally forbidden. However, converts from Islam are pressurized by their families and communities to return to Islam. Some Christians are therefore compelled to lead a double life and hide their conversion. Once discovered, a Christian with a Muslim background may be threatened with divorce and the loss of inheritance rights by family members.

Christians from all categories of Christian communities have limited access to state employment, and experience discrimination in private employment, especially where employers have ties to the government. Since religious affiliation is still recorded on ID cards (nowadays via an electronic chip), it is easy to discriminate against Christian job applicants.

Quick facts

LEADER

President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan

POPULATION

86,260,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

257,000¹

MAIN RELIGION

Islam

GOVERNMENT

Presidential Republic



Context

Religious Context	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	257,000	0.3
Muslims	84,548,000	98.0
Agnostics	1,089,000	1.3
Others	169,000	0.2

Source²

Türkiye is a presidential republic, currently under the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. According to Turkish legislation based on the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne, only four religious groups are recognized by the state: Sunni Islam, Greek Orthodoxy, Armenian Apostolics, and Judaism. A citizen's religion is

recorded in official documents, although since 2017 new ID cards no longer have a written entry for religion. However, religious affiliation is still registered on the ID card's electronic chip, and it is still common for government officials to ask for one's religion.

Turkish legislation does not allow the training of church ministers in private education centers. As a result, all Greek Orthodox and Armenian Apostolic seminaries were forced to shut down in the 1970s and 1980s and remain closed to this day. But under the guarantees of the Lausanne Treaty, the Greek and Armenian communities still maintain church grade schools accredited by the Ministry of Education. The Catholic and Protestant churches are able to provide catechetical training for their children on church premises, but do not have official facilities.

Though officially a secular state since Atatürk's reforms in the early 20th century, Türkiye is Islamizing under nationalist President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, particularly since the failed 2016 coup. According to Middle East Concern (MEC Türkiye country report, accessed 30 August 2024): "While a founding

¹ Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., World Christian Database, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

² Others include Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian. Data source: Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., World Christian Database, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

principle of the modern Turkish state is the separation of State and religion, in practice, the state controls religion and promotes the Hanafi school of Sunni Islam at home and abroad through the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet). The constitution affirms the principle of non-discrimination, including on the basis of religion, and guarantees the free exercise of worship and religious rites, including freedom from religious compulsion – provided religious practices do not undermine the fundamental rights of others.” Conversion is not prohibited by law. However, conversion to Christianity is widely considered to be unacceptable. Social and familial implications of conversion from Islam to Christianity or from one Christian denomination to another are likely.

After the attempted coup in July 2016, the government also took on more dictatorial powers and both nationalism and Islamization soared. The fight against the militant groups from a Kurdish minority intensified and Türkiye took a much more assertive stance on the international scene, becoming militarily active in neighboring Syria and Iraq, primarily targeting Kurdish forces.

Purchasing premises for church use can prove difficult since Turkish law stipulates that only certain buildings can be designated as churches. Whether permission is granted will depend on the inclination of the mayor and the attitude of the local population. Non-Muslims are tacitly banned from jobs in state administration and the security forces. Non-Muslims state that when they enlist for military service, their religious affiliation is noted by their superiors and there is also a “security check”.

How the situation varies by region

Historical Christian groups like the Armenian and Assyrian (Syriac) churches face high pressure and hostility in south-eastern Türkiye. For decades, they have been casualties of an ongoing conflict between the Turkish army and Kurdish nationalist groups. Most Turkish Christian communities are in Western coastal cities, including Istanbul. These cities tend to be more moderate and secular, while inland areas are more conservative, Islamic, and socially hostile towards Christians, including converts from Islam to Christianity.

Who is affected?

COMMUNITIES OF EXPATRIATE CHRISTIANS

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

HISTORICAL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

Historical Christian communities include the Armenian Apostolic Orthodox and Greek Orthodox churches (the only churches recognized by the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923), and the Assyrian, Syriac Orthodox and Syriac Catholic churches. All these are monitored regularly and subjected to controls and limitations by the government. Although President Erdoğan inaugurated a new Syriac Orthodox church in October 2023 (the first church built with official government support since the establishment of the Turkish republic), members of historical churches are considered “foreign” in many official dealings, and they encounter legal and bureaucratic obstacles, as well as police and community harassment. For example, the Armenian and Greek Orthodox churches require permission from the Turkish government to select new church leaders.

CONVERTS TO CHRISTIANITY

Converts to Christianity from a Muslim background bear the brunt of rights violations, Pressure comes from family, the community and even local authorities. They are considered traitors to Turkish identity.

NON-TRADITIONAL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

Non-traditional Christian communities include Baptists and Pentecostals. This category is blended with the community of converts to Christianity. They mostly exist as small groups and meet in private homes, which can lead to opposition from neighbors. A new, growing group of Christians in Türkiye consists of Christian refugees from neighboring countries, including Iran. They face high levels of social hostility, primarily because of their refugee status, but their faith makes them extra vulnerable.



Main sources of persecution and discrimination

ISLAMIC OPPRESSION COMBINED WITH RELIGIOUS NATIONALISM – ISLAMIC

Fierce, fanatical nationalism affects all ethnic minorities in Türkiye. Conversion to Christianity from Islam is seen as an offense to family and nation; converts face harassment and familial, communal and economic exclusion. The general opinion is that a true Turk is a Muslim. Conversion is not only a question of family honor being damaged, it is also seen as “insulting Turkishness”. Some converts may even face threats of violence from radical nationalist Islamist groups. Other ethnic minorities (such as Greeks, Armenians and Syriacs) face similar societal pressure and violence, as well as legal challenges and economic exclusion.

ETHNO-RELIGIOUS HOSTILITY

This source has grown stronger in the context of the Kurdish conflict. Syriac Christians in the south-eastern region particularly feel the pressure from the Syrian civil war and are caught between Kurdish clans, the government, and the Kurdish militant group, PKK. Tribal leaders use their power to push out the Syriacs from their homeland in the south-east.

CLAN OPPRESSION

Tribal law and customs still play an important role, especially in the eastern provinces of Türkiye. Converts from Islam are likely to face more pressure there, as conversion to Christianity is not only seen as a betrayal of Islam, but also of family and clan.

DICTATORIAL PARANOIA

Since the failed coup in July 2016, President Erdoğan’s government has cracked down against opposition, becoming increasingly anti-democratic and openly restricting freedom throughout Turkish society. The media have been curtailed, with President Erdoğan claiming that “democracy and free press are incompatible” and journalists are being imprisoned.

How are men and women differently affected?

WOMEN

Prevailing culture and lack of implementation of equal rights has allowed some gender inequality and high levels of domestic violence. Converts are most vulnerable, particularly in rural areas, as conversion contradicts the expectations for women to bring honor to their family. Women face house arrest, physical and sexual abuse, harassment and rejection, causing some to flee their homes to find safety. Within a shame and honor culture, many abuse victims carry trauma alone. Women also face pressure in the public sphere, such as expectations to meet Islamic ideals of dress/conduct.

Female typical pressure points:

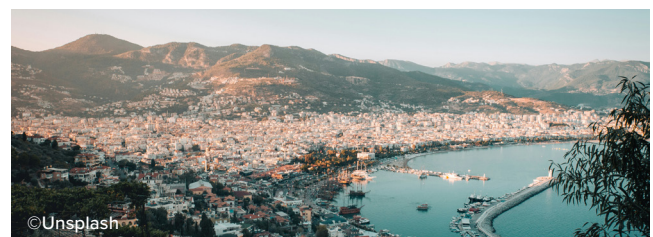
- Denied access to social community/networks
- Enforced religious dress code
- Forced out of home – expulsion
- Incarceration by family (house arrest)
- Violence – physical

MEN

Institutional and communal discrimination and hostility affects all Christians, but men face additional pressures of interwoven religious and cultural expectations. They are expected to defend Islam and Turkishness, closely aligned in public perception, often preventing men from ever entering church. Christian men and boys can be detained, threatened, arrested and mistreated by the authorities. They face job loss, inheritance loss, and/or family rejection. The military service environment can also lead to discrimination and harassment. Work in both the public and private sectors is difficult, impacting Christian communities and families.

Male typical pressure points:

- Denied inheritance or possessions
- Economic harassment via business/job/work access
- Military/militia conscription/service against conscience
- 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
2025	45	67
2024	50	64
2023	41	66
2022	42	65
2021	25	69

The three-point increase in overall score was caused mainly by a significant increase in violence score from 3.1 points in WWL 2024 to 5.4 points in WWL 2025. More church buildings were targeted than in the previous reporting period, in addition to two reported killings, while no killings were reported in WWL2024. The reported increase in violence is not outside the general violence patterns against Christians in Türkiye. Overall societal attitudes toward the church and the Christian community have not significantly changed and average pressure remained at the same very high level of 12.2 points. Societal hatred remains a serious issue of concern for all Christians, whether they belong to the Historical, Protestant or refugee communities. In addition, the Protestant community continues to be targeted with entry bans, with several expatriate Christians again being forced to leave the country. During the WWL 2025 reporting period, asylum seekers and refugees of Christian faith in particular (including converts from Islam to Christianity) from such countries as Iran, Afghanistan and Syria faced significant discrimination and abuse.

Examples of violence in the reporting period

- On 6 November 2023 a 92-year-old Assyrian Christian Gevriye Akgüç was shot and killed in the south-eastern village of Enhil (Turkish: Yemisli) in the Mardin district (Duvar English, 9 November 2023). Akgüç had fled the village following the murder of several Christians in the area in the '80s and '90s and returned to the village a decade ago. The killing underlines the marginalized position of the few remaining Christians in the area which was a century ago home to one of the largest Christian communities in the wider Middle East.
- During the reporting period, several churches were attacked or damaged, with the Islamic State attack on the Santa Maria Church in Istanbul in January 2024 sending shockwaves through the Christian communities. Another incident took place on 18 December 2023 when two assailants attacked Çekmeköy Kurtuluş Kilisesi (a church near Istanbul). They ripped off the signs of the church. Each year, a number of (historical) churches and other Christian buildings are the target of hate through graffiti, damage, or desecration.
- During the WWL 2025 reporting period, the Turkish government continued to ban expatriate Christians from (re)entering the country, often on vague security grounds.

WWL Year	Christians killed	Churches or Christian buildings attacked or closed	Christians internally displaced	Christians forced to flee their countries
2025	2	4	10*	10*
2024	0	2	1	12

This table includes only a few categories of faith-based violence during the reporting period - for full results see the violence section of the country's corresponding WWL Persecution Dynamics. 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. The same applies for symbolic numbers 10,000*, 100,000* and 1,000,000*.

PRIVATE LIFE

Public expressions of non-Muslim faiths can result in harassment. Displaying Christian symbols can provoke hostility and physical violence. Traditional Christians are socially and economically excluded from the wider Turkish society. Converts from Islam to Christianity can lose their jobs, face harassment from family and friends, or receive threats after their new faith has come to be known.

FAMILY LIFE

Children of Christian converts are often harassed and bullied because their family is perceived as having betrayed both the faith and the nation. Children whose parents are either expatriates or who belong to one of the historical Christian communities are also seen as “enemies of Türkiye” because they are viewed as being part of the “Christian West”.

The Turkish educational curriculum is heavily influenced by Turkish nationalism and portrays Christianity as foreign and hostile to Turkish society.

Applications for Christian cemeteries have been denied in several parts of the country. In those areas, Christians can only be buried according to Christian rites in sections reserved for all non-Muslims, or in the nearest historically Christian cemetery (sometimes more than 500 km away).

COMMUNITY LIFE

Christians have no access to state employment and experience discrimination in private employment. Islamic education is compulsory.

While non-Muslim children can opt out, they are likely to face ostracization and discrimination from teachers and classmates. The media is heavily influenced by nationalist pressure from the state and regularly attacks non-Muslim minorities. Christians are consistently scapegoated and discriminated against by newspapers and television as a way of both suppressing Christian voices and intimidating more tolerant Turks into silence.

NATIONAL LIFE

For Christians, access to public sector employment and other social and economic opportunities is highly restricted. Article 301 of the Turkish Penal Code states that: “A person who publicly denigrates the Turkish Nation, the Republic or the Grand National Assembly of Türkiye, shall be punishable by imprisonment,” meaning that Christians must exercise extreme caution when expressing themselves in public.

CHURCH LIFE

It is impossible to register as a new religious community. Although there is an option for churches to register as an “association”, this is also a difficult process and some applications have been denied.

Obtaining permits for building, repairing or renovating church buildings is a long and difficult process, made more so by anti-Christian sentiments within the bureaucracy. Training Christian leaders legally is impossible. The seminaries of the historical Christian communities were closed down in the 1970s and have remained closed ever since, so only unofficial training can take place.



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International obligations & rights violated

Türkiye 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)

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

- Christian converts are ostracized and faced with opposition by their families, threatened with divorce, and loss of child custody (ICCPR Art. 18)
- Christian children are harassed because of their parents' faith (ICCPR Art. 18 and CRC Art. 14)
- Churches are attacked by members of the state task force (ICCPR Art. 18)
- Christians face restrictions in employment in the public sector and experience discrimination in the private sector (ICCPR Arts. 25 and 26, and ICESCR Art. 6)
- Christians face harassment and violence if they talk about their faith or engage in proselytization (ICCPR Arts. 18 and 19)

Situation of other religious minorities

The Gülen Movement has been heavily persecuted since the 2016 coup attempt. Yazidis in Türkiye's southeast face similar issues as the Syriac Christians. Nusayri refugees (Alawites) from Syria feel enormous pressure to leave the country. The Alevites are also discriminated against (officially they do not exist as a specific group and cannot run any houses of worship) as well as Kurds in general.

According to the [US Department of State](#): *"The constitution provided a single nationality designation for all citizens and did not expressly recognize national, racial, or ethnic minorities except for three non-Muslim minorities: Armenian Apostolic Christians, Jews, and Greek Orthodox Christians. Other national, religious, or ethnic minorities, including Assyrians, Jaferis, Yezidis, Kurds, Arabs, Roma, Circassians and Laz, were not permitted to fully exercise their linguistic, religious, and cultural rights." "Alevis... remained the subject of hate speech and discrimination."*



Open Doors in Türkiye

Open Doors occasionally supports Persian Speaking refugee believers in Türkiye through trusted partners. These supports are mainly in the field of training, resourcefulness and practical support. Open Doors raises prayer support for believers in difficult situations and prayer in general for Türkiye.



ABOUT THIS BRIEF

- The content of this document is based on the more detailed WWL Persecution Dynamics per country published 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: © 2025 Open Doors International.
- All brief country profiles can be accessed under 'Advocacy resources' on the research pages of the Open Doors International website, along with the WWL Persecution Dynamics per country, accompanying Background Information per country and the latest update of WWL Methodology. These are also available at the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom).
- The WWL 2025 reporting period was 01 October 2023 – 30 September 2024.

All photos in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.